

WEST TO DENVER

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Larry Galvin considered he was helping progress by acting as scout for the construction crew of the Overland Telegraph Company. The buffalo hunters who resented the telegraph line as hampering the migration of the buffalo from the south into Montana, didn't agree with Larry.

So "Pelt" McGrew, a hard-shooting desperado who had been a trouble-maker among the Mountain Men, took advantage of the hunters' resentment and organized a raiding band which used artillery to bolster its arguments against the telegraph line.

Then to the wild and turbulent frontier came news of the firing on Fort Sumter. The telegraph crew, united until then, was split by a factional dissension; and McGrew and his crew had a new group of malcontents on whom to work.

A picturesque and colourful novel of the West during a particularly bloody chapter in the nation's history.

WEST TO DENVER

CHARLES S. STRONG

Author of

"North to the Yukon"

"The Ghost of Soapy Smith"



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MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

By John Gardner (Printers) Ltd., Liverpool and London

CHAPTER ONE

LAWRENCE GALVIN was a visionary. His mind was quick and alert and his reflexes were ready to transmit his orders to all parts of his vigorous body. His vision was that of an empire builder. In stature he was a little man. But physically and spiritually he was a big man; knowing that in one sense he was contributing more than his share to the Winning of the West.

Now, as he sat his horse on the edge of the South Platte River in Colorado Territory and gazed off into the gathering darkness, his thoughts were not on the colours of the dying sun as they painted the peaks of the mountains; nor upon the shadows which crept up through the coulees and seemed to drop into the placid waters of the river.

His eyes were on the small markers, every five of them tipped with a red or white bit of denim cloth, the signs of the surveyors who had been through this district only a few days before. In place of these he could visualize the poles of the telegraph line which would be dropping into the post holes in the days ahead; the glittering wire that would be strung from green glass insulators on the cross arms.

All of these were important to him, not only because of his wish to be a part of the marchers on the path of empire, but because his present job was that of scout for the Overland Telegraph Company. He was charged with the responsibility of building along

the South Platte River between Julesburg and Denver. The telegraph company was working to co-ordinate the communications system between the Missouri River and California.

The group he was working with was broken up into three parties. One of these was an advance party of surveyors, which was confirming the work of a survey group which had been over the route several years before. Galvin had spent the afternoon at this camp, checking on the work being done, and spending several hours in the hills hunting game for the cook pot.

The second party, headed by young Fred Pierce, an Easterner looking for opportunity in the new West, was doing the job of digging pot holes, setting the poles, putting up the cross-bars with their gaily coloured glass insulators, and stringing the wires. It was toward this camp that Galvin was riding as he stopped to give his pony a chance to drink in a pool of the South Platte.

Backing up both of these advance parties was the third section which operated the supply trains bringing up materials from depots along the trail to North Platte and Scottsbluff, and farther East.

The West was going through an important transition stage as it moved into the 1860s, and Larry Galvin was aware of the importance of his role in it. But besides the deep spiritual pull that motivated him, most men liked to work with him because he also had a down-to-earth air about everything he did. Now he was interested in the simple matter of assuring his horse a proper refreshment.

Galvin's horse was a colourful-looking beast called Patches. It was a leggy Indian pony with pinto markings. Now he rubbed down the loyal beast with hand-

fuls of long grass, brushed his fingers along its mane, and finally caressed the damp muzzle as Patches straightened up and turned to look into his master's eyes.

He brushed his muzzle against Galvin's shirt and backed away from the muddy water's edge. Galvin knelt above the drinking horse and took some of the cool, clear water himself. Patches still nudged at him. Finally, the scout stood up and asked:

"What is it, old boy? What's the trouble?"

As he spoke, Galvin was looking toward the west in the direction of the survey camp from which he had come. There was nothing unusual apparent in that direction. Then he turned to look toward the east. Immediately he straightened up. His whole being was galvanized; and with good reason. Tongues of flame were rising against the eastern sky. Sounds of gunfire were barking their flat reports on the early night air. They came from the direction of the work camp.

The two camps were only about five miles apart, so it was quite possible that the surveyors would also be alerted by this new activity. Galvin reacted to the discovery immediately, gathering up the reins, kicking his left foot into the stirrup and swinging aboard Patches.

The lively Indian pony moved out at a fast trot almost as soon as the weight of its rider settled upon its back. Galvin gave little attention to the guiding of his horse. He was more interested in what was happening at the work camp, and what he could do to assist Fred Pierce, the young Eastern crew boss.

The three miles between the spot on the South Platte and the work camp were covered in about twenty minutes. But they seemed to stretch out end-

lessly in the mind of the rider, especially since the sounds of gunfire and the consuming roar and crackle of the flames that now lit up the whole eastern sky increased in fury as he came closer to them.

Then he was able to see the first of the fires itself. The pile of poles was burning vigorously, sending up vari-coloured flames because of the various drying chemicals and other preservatives that had been used in them. Beyond, etched like some demons in a curious Dore painting, were the figures of horsemen, riding about the telegraph camp like a band of Indians.

But Galvin could tell that they were not Indians, but whites who had some reason for assaulting this work crew.

The scout swung down from Patches, moved to a vantage point above the camp site on the river bank, and brought up his rifle and his two pistols. Then he levelled his rifle and went into action.

It was tricky shooting in the dark, but the flames helped a good deal. The first few range finders were off the target; then Larry Galvin started to count coup. One of the shouting, screaming riders doubled up in his saddle, his gun clattered to the ground, and he fell forward head first into one of the smouldering fires that he and his companions had set.

A henchman paused to lift the body to his own saddle, and thus provided a perfect target for the scout. Galvin gritted his teeth, tensed his shoulder and pulled trigger. The second man toppled over the first.

A third man, riding in on the scene, looked off into the darkness toward the spot from which Galvin's gun flame was visible. Then the men in the pole camp, apparently realizing that reinforcements had come, increased their own activity.

Suddenly the gunfire at the rim of the camp ceased entirely. The scout's keen ears picked up the sounds of splashing water, and he knew that the survivors of the raiding band were moving across the shallow Platte and disappearing in the hills to the north.

Satisfied that there would be no further danger from this source, Galvin whistled to the paint pony, stood erect and then strode forward toward the camp. As he came down the hill, he could see other men coming out of the wrecked area and moving about looking over the casualties. Galvin wanted to find Fred Pierce, to learn how he and his men had suffered from this raid.

He was not long in reaching his objective. Pierce was hunched up against a wagon wheel, sorely wounded, and being helped by half a dozen of his men. Others were standing around, guns dangling from their hands; their faces covered by sweat and ashes, and their eyes showing shock. Most of them could not realize what had hit them. All of them were trying to decide what their course would be from here on out. They were grateful to Larry Galvin for assuming their burdens.

The men close to Fred Pierce opened up a passage as Galvin approached. He nodded to them in greeting, then knelt beside the young Easterner. The flames of the fire were dying down now, and one of the men held a lantern.

"How bad is it, Fred?" Galvin inquired.

A man who had been holding a canteen to Pierce's lips moved back a bit. The line foreman looked up at the scout and replied:

"Pretty bad, I guess, but I haven't had much chance to go over it. Been too busy!" He attempted a weak smile.

Galvin signalled for blankets, wrapped Pierce in them, and laid him flat on the ground with a bundle under his head. Then he set the lantern holder in such a position that light would be thrown on Pierce's wounds. He urged the cook to come up with a pot of boiling water; then with crude first aid materials from his own saddle bags he went to work.

After the clotted blood and torn clothing had been cleared away, he found that Fred Pierce had taken two bullets. One of them was high up in his shoulder and had missed the heart by only two or three inches. The other one was in the fleshy part of the hip, and would probably be more painful than dangerous, although it would limit Pierce's walking for a while.

From the expressions on the faces of the telegraph men, it was obvious that they were pleased by the efficiency and skill with which Galvin was working. When Pierce had been made comfortable, several other men pushed forward, and the frontiersman bandaged up their hurts.

Fortunately none of the telegraph men had been killed, although eight or nine of them had been wounded. Finally Galvin had cleared up the human wreckage that had been created by the battle, and turned his attention to the surroundings.

Fred Pierce dropped off to sleep while Galvin was working on the other men, and the scout decided that it would be wise not to disturb him. Instead he turned to Frank Seward, Pierce's assistant, and asked calmly:

"Just what happened here?"

Seward settled down on his haunches, looked into the haggard faces of some of the other men in the group, then replied:

"Well, the whole thing started shortly after lunch, when you left for the advance camp. They probably

figured that you'd be a tougher nut to crack than young Pierce. A group of about twenty buffalo hunters came hiking into the telegraph camp, and one of them went up to Pierce and asked for a palaver. Pierce was willing. Most of us were out on the line, digging holes and making our settings, like you know. I was about a hundred yards down the trail when these *hombres* arrived. I figured Pierce might need help, so I headed back to camp."

"What did they want to do—sell you some of their buffalo for beef?" Galvin inquired.

"Nothing like that," Seward told him. "They told us that our wire stringing was interfering with their buffalo hunting, that the telegraph line would interfere with the normal migration of the buffalo from the south up into Wyoming and Montana. They ordered us to gather up our equipment and move back into Nebraska."

Galvin whistled; then a grim smile crossed his features.

"Those *hombres* are talking through their noses," he remarked. "They know as well as I do that there are two big bison herds. One of them moves back and forth between Texas and here; only isolated bands of them move northward in Wyoming and Montana. Most of those herds up there come down from the Canadian prairies. Besides, it's likely that if anyone is going to have trouble on account of the buffalo, it'll be us, and not the other way around. Some of those bulls will be rubbing down the poles, snarling up the lines, and fouling up the whole business generally. It's a toss-up whether we're going to have more trouble from the Indians or the buffalo. But go on."

Frank Seward rolled a cigarette with fingers that

had regained their steadiness after the excitement of the raid. Then he continued:

"Pierce had plenty of guts, all right. He stood right up to those rough and ready hombres, and told them that he was doing a job, just like any of them. He put it on the line for them, and pointed out that he couldn't order his men to move back into Nebraska, because his big bosses were back in St. Louis and Kansas City. He told them that if they wanted to change things out here in Colorado, they'd have to come through with new orders."

"Good for Pierce," Galvin said grimly.

"It might have been good for him, all right. But now look at the mess we have!"

"I'm not worrying too much about that," Galvin said frankly. "If things go too smoothly out here, a fellow is likely to get careless, and then he runs into real trouble. Now we know we're bucking something stiff, and can take proper precautions to lick it. Did these hombres make any threats before they left this afternoon? How can you be sure that it's the same crew that raided us tonight?"

Several of the other men laughed harshly; then Frank Seward replied crisply: "They made threats, all right, plenty of them. They told Pierce that if he couldn't listen when they came to him politely, he'd have to learn the hard way."

Galvin turned to survey the camp, swept his arm about him and remarked:

"So this is their idea of the 'hard way'?"

"I reckon it is," Seward concluded.

Galvin, Seward and a couple of the other men took several of the lanterns and started out to survey the area. One of the men was the camp clerk, and he carried a clip board with a copy of the inventory

to determine the complete extent of the damage.

The scout watched for a while as the clerk copied down various figures and made notes. Then he turned back to Seward and said:

"It looks as though they were doing a bit of snooping around here inside our pickets before the raid. Those poles and cross bars were doused with coal oil before they were set on fire. How did that happen?"

"I reckon you might lay it down to inexperience," Seward said briskly. "But they didn't get into our camp beforehand, I can promise you that. Looks like they divided up, and some of their boys moved in from the south. The ones on the north bank of the river opened fire with rifles at long range. We moved up to the river bank to keep them from crossing. Then the other laddies came in on our flanks, doused the poles and the cross bars, and set them ablaze. We drove them off with a flurry of gunfire, and then the other hombres came in on horseback."

Galvin could visualize the strategy, and could readily understand how it would work. One of the other men spoke up then and declared:

"While we were at the height of the battle, several of them got loops on rolls of wire and sent them over the bluff into the South Platte River. Others threw burning brands onto our tents, and they were burned to shreds."

Larry Galvin had the whole picture now, and while it was bad, it might have been worse. Apparently all of the men but Fred Pierce would be able to go back to heavy work almost immediately.

When the circuit was completed and the damage had been appraised, Galvin turned to the clerk and said:

"Draw me up a list of what you'll need to replace

this burned material, and I'll send it along to Kansas City right away. We'll make a copy for the supply base at North Platte, and they'll probably have new poles coming up to us before we know it. We'll show these hombres who's the boss of the plains."

"I'll have it ready in a short while," the clerk announced. "But how are we going to get it back? They've smashed up our telegraph gear."

Larry Galvin chuckled, then replied:

"The Pony Express will be coming through here in about half an hour, and I'm sure they'll be glad to carry it through for us."

A number of the men found grim humour in this. Everyone on the frontier knew that when the telegraph line was completed, the Pony Express would be a thing of the past, and here one of its riders was being asked to help hasten his own end.

CHAPTER TWO

It was still fairly early in the evening when the list of replacement supplies was drawn up, and ready for the Pony Express rider. Galvin took it over to where Fred Pierce was lying, and knelt down beside the foreman. The first shock of his experience with the buffalo hunters had worn off, and Pierce's quick mind was working clearly, even though he was flat on his back.

Galvin told him what they had been doing, and he was grateful to them. Then the scout said:

"If you'll sign this pair of orders for us, I think they'll be in shape for the supply boys."

Fred Pierce held a pencil in his tired hand and managed to scrawl a signature on the papers. Then Galvin said:

"I don't think there's much we can do in the way of cleaning up here until daylight. We'll post pickets and turn in to our soogans. Cookie probably has the coffee boiling by now, and if you want to line your stomachs, he'll probably have grub, too. At least we've got to set out something for the Pony Express rider."

Glad to have something to do, the men moved away from Galvin and Pierce. The two supervisors talked over matters in whispers. They were interrupted about half an hour later by the clatter of hoofs from the west along the trail Galvin had followed on Patches earlier in the evening. Normally the Pony

Express rider would not have stopped at the telegraph camp, being content merely to wave a greeting and dash on through, heading for his relay station at Julesburg to the east.

Tonight, though, the signs of the raid on the camp would certainly arouse his curiosity. Moments later the rider was in the centre of the camp, and reining in as Galvin had expected. The frontiersman ran up alongside his horse and held up the papers with a gold piece.

• "Here are orders to our boys at the supply camp, and to the bit boys in Kaycee. We've had a heap of trouble here to night, but we're figuring on cleaning it up and pushing West again."

The cookie was there with a cup of steaming coffee, and sandwiches wrapped in paper so the rider could consume them on the run. Fred Pierce looked up at the youthful rider as Galvin talked to him.

The rider drank the coffee, stuffed the papers into his moquillas, and then was back in the saddle and on his way. As soon as the sounds of the hoof beats had died out to the east, Pierce called to Galvin.

"Do you think that letter will get through all right?" he asked.

"Why not?" Galvin inquired in some surprise.

"That fellow was just a kid," Pierce pointed out. "Couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen at the most."

"Fourteen would be more like it, maybe," Galvin said, with no indication of surprise. "That was Bill Cody. He knows these trails like the palm of his hands. The Indians think a lot of him, and he's done plenty for the white folks, too. He'll get through if anyone will. Don't worry."

Fred Pierce looked off into the darkness. Galvin

accepted a mug of coffee and a couple of antelope sandwiches from the cook as that active worker came over to succour Fred Pierce. While Galvin was chewing on the food and washing it down with the hot coffee, Frank Seward came up and asked:

"What do we do now? The men are on guard duty, and the others are bedded down with a good meal in their bellies."

"How are the horses and wagons?" Galvin inquired.

"In good shape. I figure these hombres wanted us to get out of here, and they didn't figure on us walking," Seward replied.

Frank Seward was normally an easygoing fellow. Tall and gaunt, he looked as though he had been battling prairie wind and sand storms, and the winters and rains of many years. But it had left him with a philosophic attitude.

"Hitch up a wagon, and pad it good. I've decided that Fred Pierce would be a lot better off if we could get him in to a doctor at Julesburg, or maybe even in Ogallala."

Seward moved off to carry out these orders. Before he had gone many steps, however, Fred Pierce raised himself on his good elbow and called:

"Never mind the horses, Frank. I'm not going to Julesburg or Ogallala or anywhere else until I've completed this line west to Denver."

Larry Galvin settled down beside the wounded man and eased him back to the ground. Then he said:

"Now you're being foolish, fellow. You don't want blood-poisoning to set in, and eat out your insides, do you? You're likely to wake up some night, burning with fever, and in the morning we'll be patting

you in the face with a shovel. You've got to see a doctor."

"You're doctor enough for me," Pierce told him calmly. "I'm feeling much better already, and I'm going to stay here—right here!" he emphasized, and concluded grimly, "even if it does kill me!"

Larry realized that this was neither the time nor the place to argue the matter.

"Okay," he agreed. Then he turned to Seward and said: "Roll your soogans close to Pierce, and keep an eye on him. I've got other business to look after."

Pierce was still a bit suspicious of Galvin's actions. He looked up at him and asked:

"What other business?"

"I'm going to try and pick up the trail of those buffalo hunters, and see whether they're cooking up any more sour stew for us."

"A good idea," Pierce agreed. "But be careful. You're a good man, and we wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

Galvin touched the peak of his hat in an informal salute, rose from his haunches and strode off into the gloom beyond the burned area. He spotted the telegraph men sleeping on the prairie. Tonight the air would be warm and muggy from the still-hot coals all around them, but by tomorrow night it would be necessary for them to have some form of shelter from the chilling cold.

The frontiersman found Patches, where he had left him at the edge of camp. He gathered up the reins, tightened the cinches, and swung aboard. He checked the rifle in the saddle sheath and looked over the guns in his twin holsters as the horse made its way down a winding path from the bluffs to the shallow ford on the river.

He could see where the wire reels were half covered with water, and knew that it would not be too difficult to get them back on shore, although it might be quite a job to take them back atop the bluffs.

The scattered trails of the buffalo hunters, sent fleeing helter-skelter by his unexpected arrival, merged into one broad path about three miles north of the South Platte River. Back on the other side of the river, Galvin spotted several riders and decided that they were probably men arriving belatedly from the surveyors' camp. His thoughts turned to Fred Pierce.

Galvin had learned that Pierce was a graduate of a good engineering school in the East, that all of his instructors felt that he had a brilliant future ahead of him, and all would be interested in learning of his progress.

The running of the telegraph line between Julesburg and Denver was Pierce's first big independent responsibility. Before undertaking it he had lived in Kansas City for a while, and during that period had become engaged to the daughter of a wealthy Kansas City business man.

The scout smiled as he moved along through the darkness. Being a confidant of Pierce's, he probably knew more about Susan Dillard than any other man west of Kansas City. Pierce filled every free moment with descriptions of her beauty, her talents, her interest in his future, and the plans she was already making for both of them.

The young engineer liked to tell of the talk he had had with Susan's father, Arthur Dillard. The older man had offered to invest in Pierce's future, to establish him in his own business, and to see that clients came his way. He pointed out that there were many

splendid opportunities along the Missouri and down the Mississippi, and in New Orleans and many more civilized places than Julesburg and Denver.

But Fred Pierce was an independent fellow. He wanted everyone to know that he was marrying Susan Dillard for herself, and not for the moneybags which her father could lay claim to. He wanted to establish himself in his field so that there need never be any question of his financial responsibility. Susan understood his position completely and admired him for it. She was willing to encourage him to do things his own way.

Now that Fred Pierce had run into his first real opposition on the prairies and in the foothills of the Rockies, Galvin could readily understand why he would not want the word to get back to the Dillards that he had suffered a defeat in his first brush with the wild frontier.

"Pierce is a good man." Galvin concluded, talking aloud. "I'm going to do my best to see that he comes through this deal with flying colours."

Patches looked around and shook his bit chains gingerly as though agreeing completely. Then horse and man concentrated their attention upon the matter immediately concerning them.

Several of the telegraph men, including Seward and Pierce, had told Galvin something about the appearance of the leader of the buffalo hunters who had visited the camp in the afternoon, and then apparently led the raiders in the evening. From the descriptions, the scout was convinced that it could be none other than a fellow known as Pelt McGrew, a rough and ready fellow who had been in the mountains and on the plains for something like forty years, and who had gained a certain ill-fame in the

Thirties and Forties as a trouble-maker among the Mountain Men!

The trail of the raiders led from the ruined telegraph camp northward for about five or six miles. Then it joined a much wider trail which came in on an arc from the west. Galvin paused here to rest his horse and determine the significance of the sign. He leaned against Patches' shoulder and remarked:

"Looks like our raiding party was only a part of this buffalo hunting outfit."

The sign on the ground indicated that the buffalo hunters had come up from the south, by-passed the telegraph camp, and were heading northward toward Fort Laramie where they would be able to sell their buffalo hides, and get the rewards for their weeks or months on the prairie. The signs also indicated that the buffalo hunters, easily identifiable by their single mounts, had been accompanied by half a dozen heavily loaded wagons. These had apparently been left in the care of the skinners and teamsters with orders to make camp somewhere a bit farther north, while the more rugged buffalo hunters made their raid on the telegraph camp.

With the information he had gathered, Galvin formed an opinion in his own mind as to the size of the group, their attitudes, and the precautions they would be likely to take to protect themselves. Pelt McGrew was a canny fellow, and if this was his outfit, Galvin might expect trouble.

Prepared in this way, he swung back aboard his mount, heeled the animal into motion, and continued northward, following the broad trail of the wagons. His journey continued for almost an hour longer; then Galvin spotted the camp of the buffalo hunters.

Boy, they're sure taking chances, was Galvin's first reaction.

There had been no attempt made to hide the camp. It was in full view out in an open part of the prairie, although there was a grove of trees to the east, and apparently these were being used to shelter the wagons and horses.

The buffalo hunters were seated around a blazing fire; the bundled forms on the ground beyond the light of the fire were obviously the soogan-wrapped sleepers of the wagon train.

"It certainly looks as though they're sure of themselves," Galvin remarked. "They don't expect any trouble from the Indians, and it's a cinch they're not expecting any retaliation from the telegraph camp. But the whole deal is sure plumb dangerous. The Injuns have no love for buffalo hunters, and even if McGrew is on good terms with the Indian chiefs, there's no telling when a bunch of wild young warriors will bust loose and scalp and thief. McGrew has more nerve than I would have."

Galvin decided that he had come as close to the camp as Patches could take him, so he dismounted and began leading the horse in an arc toward the sheltering trees where the wagons and teams were kept.

The frontiersman finally loosened the cinches on Patches' saddle, trailed the reins on the ground, whispered something in the horse's ear, and moved off into the darkness.

He came close enough to the wagons and horses to be certain of their exact location, and even counted the teamsters and skinnners, before he finally made his way to the fringe of the carousing buffalo hunters.

The last hundred yards was completed on the ground,

with Galvin, hunching along on his elbows and knees. Finally he was close enough to see and hear what was going on.

Galvin checked the faces of the men who were looking in his direction, and among them he had no difficulty spotting the bearded visage of Pelt McGrew. Apparently McGrew had been telling the other men what he thought about the success of the raid.

One of the buffalo hunters, his tongue apparently loosened by the liquor he had been drinking, had finally dredged up enough courage to announce:

"I don't think it was as much of a success as you figure, Pelt!"

McGrew turned on the man, half in amazement and half in curiosity.

"How do you figure that out?" he demanded. "We sure burned up all their poles and cross pieces, didn't we? We sent their wire into the South Platte, didn't we? They can't string wire if they don't have it; and they need poles before they can even string wire. Hah-hah-ha!"

"We lost five men," the first speaker pointed out. "How many do you figure they lost?"

Pelt McGrew shrugged, then replied:

"I know I did for that Pierce hombre. I plugged him dead centre twice, and no one comes through that. The others didn't matter. They'll scatter like quail in the morning. Besides, if we lost five men, it means the divvy will be that much larger."

Galvin began his slow retreat, his mind turning over a plan.

CHAPTER THREE

It took Larry Galvin half an hour to get a safe distance from the blazing fire, which was now dying down. Then he was able to climb to his hands and knees and crawl off through the tall grass in an arc which led to the thicket where the horses and wagons had been billeted for the night.

The horses of the buffalo men were in a crude corral which was made by stringing lass ropes from one tree to another in a giant, irregular circle. The scout let down the rope in several places and located the team horses who were herded together in a section close to the wagons. Then he found the harness, and managed to place this on the backs of the willing animals without too much trouble.

Then he led the team slowly toward the wagon which was closest to the open prairie, with a clear sweep to the north bank of the South Platte. Galvin anchored the team for a while, resumed his Injun stalking methods and came up close to the wagon. The scout was familiar enough with life on the plains to know that a teamster usually slept in his wagon, or beneath it, while he was out on the range.

A turtle crawl journey under the wagon convinced him that the teamster was not there. He moved to the tailboard then, found the folding steps, and silently lowered them into position. He mounted the steps, paused as a creaking joint protested against his weight; then his hand brushed against the wool-

covered legs of a man. This made the situation a little more complicated. If the teamster had been sleeping with his head toward the rear of the wagon, Galvin would have been able to throttle any outcry without difficulty. Now he would have to move in beside the fellow.

"Who is it?"

Before he could say or do anything else, Galvin leaped as lithely as a cougar, caught the man by the throat and the jaw, and effectively silenced him.

The wagon bed was piled high with buffalo robes, and the teamster was sleeping on top of them. Galvin's knife came from his belt and he cut a piece of the furry hide from the corner nearest the neck. Then he slapped this evil-smelling gag into the mouth of the teamster, and almost choked him. After taking the time to cut several pigging strings from the sides of the hide, he lashed the gag into place, tied the teamster's hands behind him, and then bound his legs.

These preliminaries looked after, Galvin then settled down beside the teamster to wait for the fire to die out completely, and the buffalo hunters to drop off into a sound, liquor-fogged sleep.

Now and then he looked out through the open flaps of the wagon to determine the passing of time. He checked the positions of the constellations in the star-studded sky. Finally he decided it was time to move. His first problem was whether to take the teamster along with him as a prisoner, or to leave him behind.

Galvin finally decided to leave the man in the wagon until he was well out on the plains, and away from the buffalo hunters' camp. He climbed down from the rear of the wagon, folded up the steps, went

towards the waiting teams and led them into position. The business of fastening the tugs and toggles was completed in jig time, and with a minimum of noise. The canny scout wrapped the metal in cloth so that it would not cause a clatter.

Then he threw a last look in the direction of the sleeping camp before moving to the head of the first team, and gripping the reins close to the bit. He headed out of the camp, and led the team for about a hundred yards. Here he was close to where Patches was grazing.

Galvin hooked the wagon reins to the horn of the pinto's saddle, and said:

"Look after them, Patches; I've a little chore to handle."

The frontiersman hurried back toward the buffalo hunters' camp and moved into the area where the horses were corralled. Here he took down the rope confining them. Galvin knew that it would not be too long before the half-wild horses realized that they could have their freedom and would begin to amble out onto the open prairie.

These arrangements completed, Galvin returned to the hide wagon, unfastened the reins, and climbed up to the front seat.

A glance back toward his prisoner indicated that he had not freed himself, so Galvin looked ahead and then clucked to the horses. They heaved into the collars and moved out. The grade was generally downhill to the banks of the South Platte, and the teams made good time in the brisk night air.

Patches trotted along beside the wagon.

When they were about three miles from the buffalo camp, Galvin pulled up on the reins, fastened the loose ends about the wheel brake handle, and

climbed down from the seat. He walked around to the rear of the hide cart and climbed aboard. The teamster was fully awake now, and thrashing around as though afraid that he would not escape alive from this kidnapping.

"How are you feeling?" Calvin asked him.

The teamster's eyes bulged out. Calvin reached up and unfastened the gag. The buffalo man spat out the hairy mess that was between his teeth. Then he launched into a tirade that might well have burned the ears of any individual less salty than Larry Calvin.

"That's no way to talk to me," Calvin said calmly. "I'm trying to give you a break. If I ever took you back to the telegraph camp, the boys there would probably tear you limb from limb. All you need now is a little exercise, and you'll be back at camp before you know it."

As he spoke, Calvin knelt down and unfastened the man's legs. Then the scout helped him out of the wagon and eased him to the ground. By this time the teamster had cursed himself out, and was thinking more seriously about his predicament. Finally he asked:

"What's going on here?"

Calvin looked at him curiously, then replied calmly:

"In case you don't know, Pelt McGrew and the boys raided the camp of the Overland Telegraph Company and burned up all of their equipment. I'm taking a wagonload of hides to make a shelter for the boys. When you get back to camp, you might tell Pelt McGrew that he's bucking Larry Calvin, and he hasn't seen the day when he could go one-two with me and come out on top. Tell him that for me."

The circulation was coming back into the legs of the bound teamster, and he tried to push himself to his feet. For a while the pins and needles would not let him stand. He tried to take a step or two away from the tail gate of the wagon, but tottered, and finally whirled around and grabbed for the chain.

This little operation of releasing his prisoner was taking a bit more time than Galvin had anticipated. He began studying his back trail with interest, and soon spotted some moving figures on the grey line of demarcation that cut apart the sky and the prairie gloom.

"It looks as though some of your friends have come after you," Galvin announced. "You'd better be on your way."

He gave the teamster a shove in the direction of the camp, then went back around the wagon and climbed up to the driver's seat. As he was gathering up the reins, there was a burst of gunfire, and lead began spattering all about him. Larry did not think he was in too much danger, but he did look back in the direction of the pursuers. He was delighted to discover that they were coming on foot. The heavy vehicle with its burdensome load held back the horses, so they were able to go little faster than a walk themselves.

The fact that none of the shots thrown in his direction had come close to him indicated that the night's activities had not improved their target practice. It was possible, too, that they were out of six-gun range. Night shooting was tricky at best, and distances were deceiving. Finally there was an interlude when the teamster cried out:

"Don't shoot; it's me, Butch!"

Pelt McGrew shouted: "What's the matter with

you, Butch? What's the idea of driving your wagon all over the range at this time of night? Get it headed back for camp and let's all get some sleep."

While Butch was closing the distance between himself and the Buffalo hunters, and trying to explain that the wagon was no longer in his possession, Larry Galvin whipped up the horses and continued his journey toward the river.

No one tried to interrupt him for about half an hour, and by that time he was only a mile or so from the river. The downgrade speeded up the progress of the horses, and in the east a curtain of grey was doing its best to push the night aside.

Three or four riflemen then put in an appearance about half a mile behind him, and one of them tried to draw a bead on the wagon. Galvin whistled for Patches and the pinto pony came in beside the hide wagon. The scout drew his rifle from its sheath, lay flat on the stacks of hides, and swung his barrel level with the riders behind him. Apparently they had succeeded in locating horses. Two of them were mounted, and judging from the gunfire, the other two had been brought to the scene of action by their comrades, and were now hunkered down in a buffalo wallow.

Galvin's first shot was aimed at the men who were still mounted. Apparently the lead struck one of the horses, burning his hide in such a way that the animal reared into the air and his rider had to fight to keep his seat.

The team of horses, with a load behind them, and a downhill pull, continued their journey toward the river crossing with no urging from the driver. Patches did his share by trotting along beside with his gear jingling.

This brought Galvin out of range of two of his pursuers, and when Galvin's gunfire exploded among them the mounted men decided that it would be wise for them to retreat.

The shooting so close to the north bank of the South Platte River had another important result. The telegraph men in their camp on the opposite bluff were aroused from their soogans by the shooting and immediately tumbled out to learn what was happening.

The men on guard duty were running toward the ford, and had their rifles ready to support Galvin's fusillade if it became necessary. At sight of this new opposition the buffalo hunters realized that they were coming into dangerous territory.

Larry Galvin smiled grimly, then crawled back to the wagon seat, settled himself and gathered up the reins. He began whistling pleasantly to the horses, and moments later the first team was splashing into the waters of the river. The unwieldy wagon was guided across the ford gingerly, and then the telegraph men came up alongside.

Frank Seward was at their head. He appeared surprised to see Galvin driving the wagon, especially when he learned of its contents.

"Where did you get that rig?" he asked briskly.

"It belonged to Pelt McGrew and the boys who raided our camp last night. I convinced them that it would be downright uncomfortable sleeping out on the cold ground; that we'd be much more comfortable with a stack of buffalo robes. There's plenty here for bed and tepec."

Frank Seward scratched his head in puzzlement, then inquired:

"You mean McGrew gave them to you?"

"Not exactly," Calvin laughed. "That wasn't an escort you saw pelting lead at me thereon the other side of the river. I had to do a little arguing to latch onto this cargo. But it looks as though I've gotten it back here safely."

"That you have, all right," agreed several of the other men, and they laughed happily. "Wait until Pierce hears about this. It'll be better than all the medicine in the world."

"Good," Calvin declared. "Let's go and tell him about it."

He whipped up the horses, to make the grade to the bluff, and then the wagon splashed out of the river. The telegraph men were singing as they supplied a merry escort.

CHAPTER FOUR

WITH the arrival of the hide wagon, and the stories of the guards as to the way in which Larry Galvin had tricked the buffalo hunters and stolen the hides, morale in the telegraph camp immediately took a big jump. Any intention any one of the wounded or ill might have had of sleeping late was almost immediately changed.

Even Fred Pierce wanted to be helped out of his pallet so that he could tell Galvin what he thought of his night escapade. Galvin assured him that he would tell him all about it at the first opportunity.

Breakfast was a much more gala affair than supper had been the night before. Pierce issued his instructions to Frank Seward, and concluded:

"Larry probably has some ideas about how this job ought to be done, and I'll expect you to listen to him."

This sort of a suggestion was unnecessary, and all of the men in the camp knew it. But if Pierce was trying to observe protocol, the other men respected him enough to agree. Larry Galvin studied the gang boss and said:

"I'll be available later on, Frank. But the first job I'm going to handle is the business of checking Fred's wounds. I'd say that there might be a chance of salvaging some of the poles and cross arms. If there is, then you can put a skeleton staff on the line, and use the others to straighten out the camp. From the

little I saw of those reels, it's going to be quite a trick to get them back on firm ground. We'll look into that, too. But Fred comes first."

"Keno," agreed the assistant foreman. He moved off to organize his part of the job. Larry then went away long enough to locate his own gear in the ruins of the tents. Much of it was packed in iron-bound chests, and had not been damaged too much by the fire. Galvin rummaged in it and brought out medication and bandages. Then he located a kit of doctor's tools which he had wrapped in sterile coverings. He slipped this into his pocket.

On the way back toward where Pierce was lying on his bedding, he stopped by the cook's corner and asked for several pails of hot water. These were forthcoming shortly after he had returned to his patient and was preparing him for examination.

After he studied all of the preparations, Fred Pierce forced a tired smile to his pain-wracked face, and asked:

"What do you figure on doing?"

"You're not going to heal properly until you get the lead out of your carcass," Galvin replied pleasantly enough. "If you won't let the sawbones down in Julesburg do the job, then you're going to have to take it my way."

Fred Pierce bit his lip and remarked: "I'm game, if you are."

When Galvin was ready, and the water had arrived, he cleaned himself up. As a final gesture, he took a bottle of brandy from his pocket, handed it to Pierce and said:

"This is about the only anaesthetic we've got around the place. Take a nip of it before I begin; then swallow it when the pain gets to be too much."

Pierce nodded, then took a long drink of the brandy. Pierce reached forward his other hand as Galvin offered him a hard, round stick.

"Hold onto this," the scout declared; "then you won't go ramming your fingernails into the palm of your hands. If you start biting your lips, put the bottle or the stick between your teeth. Here we go!"

This was the sum total of the conversation. Several of the telegraph men stood in the background and watched the operation, but no one said anything.

Galvin worked deftly and skilfully. He removed the blood-stained bandages that had been worn during the night and threw them into a nearby fire. Then he examined the inflamed areas around the two wounds, and probed with gentle fingers for some lumpiness that would indicate the final resting place of the bullets.

He had no trouble locating the one in the hip. He cleaned the area with warm water and soap, rinsed it, then bathed it in alcohol. Next he took one of his sterilized instruments, lanced the area, and the pellet of lead popped out into his hand. He examined it for a moment, then set it aside carefully in a ball of cotton.

Next he cleaned the wound carefully. It was bleeding freely now and cleansing itself. He permitted this sterilizing action to go on for a while, then arranged a dressing, bandaged the wound carefully, and covered it up.

There was a clatter of glass as the brandy bottle struck the ground. Larry Galvin looked up at the sound. Pierce's eyes were closed. Galvin took the stick from his other hand, picked up the brandy bottle and corked it.

Frank Seward moved up and whispered:

"What happened? Is he dead?"

"No," Galvin reassured him. "Just fainted. It's probably better for him."

Galvin checked the man's breathing and heart-beat to assure himself that it was firm and vigorous. Then he turned to the more difficult task of getting the bullet out of his shoulder. This task took him almost a half-hour. He probed with a long thin instrument, and deftly located the bullet, but was afraid that it would be so close to the heart or lungs that any amateurish and bungling operation would indeed kill the telegraph man.

Finally, however, blood began to flow from this wound, too. Galvin changed the position of his instruments a bit, and finally felt the leaden slug working its way along the now slippery passage. When it popped out into his hand he breathed a sign of relief.

His actions were quick and sure now as he cleaned up the area, sterilized it, applied the dressings and bandages. He covered Pierce's chest with his clothing, covered him with blankets, and then worked on the relatively simple task of bringing him out of the faint.

About ten minutes later Fred Pierce opened his eyes. He looked up at Galvin. The scout was holding the brandy bottle in his hand. The telegraph man's lips were quivering, and he said:

"I'm a poor patient, aren't I?"

"One of the best in the world," Galvin assured him.

"But I messed up your whole job, didn't I?"

"Not at all," Galvin said. He held up the two pistol bullets and remarked: "Here's the mess that's been causing all the trouble. Now that I've taken

charge of them, you've got nothing ahead of you but rest and recuperation. Relax, mister, and stop worrying."

Fred Pierce's lips were dry. He tried to moisten them, but somehow the saliva would not come. Finally he gripped Galvin's hand, pressed it firmly, then closed his eyes and dropped off to sleep. Galvin straightened up, turned to the cook and said:

"Keep an eye on him. When he wakes up, he'll be feeling much better, and I've got a hunch he'll be as hungry as all get-out. Give him a bowl of hot stew, about as hot as he can stand it."

The cook nodded. Galvin put away his medication, cleaned up the surrounding area, and returned the pails to the chuck wagon. Then Frank Seward came up to him and shook his hand.

"You did a top notch job, mister. All of the boys were impressed by the way you acted as though you knew what you were doing every minute of the time. I've heard about you boys who are aces with gunshot wounds; but this is the first chance I've had really to see one in action."

Larry Galvin nodded. Now that the matter of Fred Pierce was satisfactorily cleared up for the time being, the scout had a chance to look around the camp. The clean-up squad was doing an excellent job. Much of the wreckage had been raked and shovelled to one corner of the site, and was being disposed of.

Out along the line which stretched southwestward toward Denver there was the sound of pick and shovel; the batter of hammer and maul, and the music of the poles dropping into place, and the cross bars being bolted to their positions.

Seward accompanied him as they moved toward

the pole piles. Galvin looked them over, saw how some of the teamsters were snaking the poles out into an open area, and knocking off the charred portions to determine whether they were sturdy enough to go into place.

"How many poles do you figure we lost?" Galvin finally asked.

"About two hundred," Seward replied. "We had five hundred in this lot. After we raked the top ones off the pile, the ones underneath were in perfect shape. It's a cinch those buffalo hunters don't know too much about storing poles."

"Lucky thing for us," declared Galvin with a chuckle. "Are you doing anything about those wire reels?"

"I've got some men down in the river now, with our cart teams. But they don't seem to be making much progress. Afraid they're going to slip into quicksand or something, I'd say."

"There's no need for them to do that," Galvin assured him. "I think we've got the solution for that. Let's make the buffalo boys work for us again."

Frank Seward was a bit puzzled by this remark, but followed in Galvin's wake. The scout led him to the spot where the telegraph company's horses were usually corralled, and there Galvin went toward the three teams which had pulled the hide wagon from the McGrew camp.

Galvin harnessed up the teams, then led them toward the spot where the charred and otherwise useless poles had been set aside. He located several pairs of grab hooks, fastened them to chains, and then slapped them into the discarded poles. He snaked them out of the debris, and started his horses down the slope toward the river bank.

Frank Seward and one of his men followed this cue with the other teams and some of the poles. When they were all along the bank, Seward asked: "What do we do next?"

"We've got to bring down enough poles to make a good, substantial raft for the deep water, and a corduroy base for the shallow water. Then the men won't have to worry about their footing."

"Good idea," agreed Seward promptly. "It looks to me like you're not going to let any of these poles go to waste."

Larry Galvin chuckled, then pitched in with the other men to make his plan work.

When the first reel was properly settled on the raft, and Galvin had the whole business towed to the ford where it could be rolled off and brought to the camp by the horses, the men had wanted their superiors to leave the balance of the job to them. They would show quickly they were apt students.

Larry Galvin and Frank Seward chuckled; then Galvin said briskly:

"We're all in this together. No one is going to lay down on the job until Overland Telegraph is moving west again to Denver."

In this spirit, they went ahead throughout the remainder of the morning, and on into the afternoon with only a brief break for lunch. As soon as the first reel was brought into its proper place in the camp, the teamster responsible for it was withdrawn from the salvage operation, helped to load the reel on his cart and set out on the trail to string wire between the newly set poles.

"Boy, this would please the old boys back in Kaycee no end," Seward said.

During the day most of the men at the survey

camp came in to look over the damage, and to assay the delay that might be caused by it.

All of them were amazed at the way the pole-setters had succeeded in restoring the unit. Frank Seward talked to them for a while, and asked:

"Are your survey men out in front?"

"Sure thing," was the reply from the young surveyor. "They were up at six o'clock this morning, and slogging ahead just as though nothing had happened. I reckon they've picked a spot for a new camp by this time. We'll be moving up at about three o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"First rate," Galvin told him. "We'll be ready to move into your place about then."

When the surveyors headed back west, Galvin saddled Patches and rode along with them. The head of the surveyors was a lad named George Billings.

"Do you think it's all over?"

He was in his middle twenties, bright-eyed, alert, and looking for a chance to get ahead. Larry Galvin always enjoyed being with him.

While they were riding, Billings asked about the details of the previous night's raid. Galvin told him all about it. Then Billings asked:

"I'm afraid not," Galvin said grimly. "As a matter of fact, I'm looking for trouble tonight. Pelt McGrew probably chewed on his nails when he realized what happened this morning at his camp. Tonight he'll probably bare his teeth and try to take his vengeance. That's why I'd like you to give us a hand."

Gillings listened carefully while Larry Galvin explained his plan. Galvin concluded:

"I've got a hunch that McGrew will be keeping an eye on our place, but won't be too worried about what you boys are doing. So you might send back a

man to check with the supply train and alert them for trouble. Keno?"

"Keno," agreed Billings. "You leave it to me."

Galvin, Billings and the others exchanged a few other pleasantries; then the scout bade them farewell, paused his pinto on a high spot of ground and watched them move toward the horizon.

CHAPTER FIVE

As the surveyors stirred up the dust on the westward trail, Larry Galvin found himself breathing of the dusty air about him. At the same time his chest swelled with a feeling of freedom. He held a hand over his forehead to shade his eyes and checked the radius to the north of him. On the horizon in that direction he could see columns of smoke arising.

That would be the buffalo hunters' camp. It was obvious that they had not left, and apparently had no immediate intentions of leaving. Galvin's piercing gaze then moved off toward the east. His eyes lighted on the placid bosom of the South Platte River, on the silver and gold and purple that the setting sun reflected in the waters.

Then he surveyed the southern arc. The country was silent, challenging, threatening. Here and there a buffalo bull with several cows and calves was visible. Antelope grazed on the far slopes, heard a frightening sound, ran for about a quarter of a mile, then stopped and resumed grazing. The world was going about the process of living in a coolly normal way.

Galvin chuckled, gigged his horse and took the eastward trail. He carried field glasses in a pouch alongside his left knee. Now and then he took these from their case, levelled them at his eyes and studied his surroundings. Suddenly he glimpsed movement

toward the northeast. He focused the lenses more carefully, saw a dozen riders moving determinedly toward the South Platte River.

Galvin lowered the glasses, then whistled:

"It looks as though Pelt McGrew is looking for more trouble."

The scout's first impulse was to gallop directly to the camp and sound the alarm. But then he decided that since the element of surprise had worked so well the night before, it might be a good idea to give it a chance to work again. He changed the course of his pinto, angled for the river, and crossed at a ford several miles west of the camp crossing.

When he was on the same side of the river with the killer buffalo hunters, he began to figure his further strategy. His plans would depend largely upon what McGrew intended to do. If he were merely reconnoitring the telegraph camp to discover how seriously the previous night's raid had hurt it, then there would be no justification for interference. Another raid might be in the wind, and if it was, then would be the time for Galvin to take a hand.

The buffalo hunters came toward the north bank of the river apparently without seeing Galvin. He had the advantage of them, because their attention was concentrated on the telegraph camp, and apparently they had not spotted him. There were about a dozen of the Sharps men under McGrew, and they rode with grim determination on their faces.

When they were on a knoll about a hundred yards north of the river, Pelt McGrew halted. The telegraph camp guards under the command of Frank Seward were ranged along the south bank of the river with their rifles ready.

McGrew watched the activity in the camp for a while, then called out:

"Send out Pierce. I'd like to palaver with him."

"Pierce is busy," Seward replied calmly. "If you do any palavering, it'll be to us. From here on in, we're letting our guns do the talking where you're concerned. The river is your dividing line; if you try to cross it, we're forgetting the palaver and shooting first."

Several of Pelt McGrew's men raised their rifles, and their fingers were heavy on the trigger. One or two of the telegraph men looked as though they might like to flee, but after shifting their legs tentatively, they straightened up and remained close to the assistant foreman.

McGrew conferred with several of his men. They turned their horses and rode back toward the camp under the leadership of a desperado named Ace Fosdick. Ace had earned his name by more than uncommon luck with a deck of cards in the buffalo camps and the shipping points.

Larry Galvin kept his eyes on this group, convinced that some trickery was afoot. In the meantime, McGrew continued his talk with Seward, saying:

"We've come to get back our team and wagon, and the hides that were stolen from our camp last night. If they're not on this side of the river in fifteen minutes, we're going to get rough."

Seward laughed, then remarked:

"You do thousands of dollars of damage in our camp, and then you're worried about a few measly hides. That's justice, all right."

The other telegraph men laughed, too. McGrew was becoming restless. Fosdick and his men were out

of sight of the river now, and working on a big arc toward the west which would bring them to another ford on the South Platte. Galvin was still able to keep them clearly in view. When it looked as though they were going to ride close to the clump of trees where he had his observation post, he made preparations to receive them.

Fosdick was talking to the four men with him. "That McGrew is sure a handy chin-wagger. He'll keep those boys so busy that we'll be in the middle of that telegraph camp before they know it. And by the time Seward and his men get back up on the bluff, we'll have things all our own way. Clever boy, McGrew."

"Not too clever," Galvin remarked. "If he was, he'd have taken you and your whole dirty crew and headed for Fort Laramie this morning!"

Ace Fosdick pulled his horse to a halt, looked at the grim quartette with him and asked:

"Who said that?"

Larry Galvin appeared at the edge of the thicket then, his rifle at the ready, and replied:

"I did. What are you going to do about it?"

Ace Fosdick's right hand moved with the speed of a darting snake, and in a split-second his six-gun levelled over his thigh. But it wasn't fast enough. Galvin squeezed off a shot. The bullet burned across the back of Fosdick's hand and the gun dropped into the dust.

The explosion galvanized the men on both banks at the river crossing. Pelt McGrew was a bit puzzled at first, and looked across the river for some signs of the opening of the new raid. Then his common sense told him that Fosdick and his men hadn't had time to reach the telegraph camp. He next turned toward

the clump of trees where Galvin had taken up his position.

But the frontier scout did not give too much attention to him. He was alert for any treachery from Fosdick or the four gunmen with him. His rifle, with a tendril of smoke still filtering from the muzzle, moved in an arc across the chests of the five men. Then he said:

"Drop your guns, boys, and do it gently. It'd be plumb embarrassing—for you—if one of them went off while it was pointed in the wrong direction."

The four buffalo hunters gingerly reached for the butts of their guns, then slipped them from the holsters and let them drop to the ground. McGrew, unaware of the fact that his henchmen did not have their situation under control ordered a blistering fire at the telegraph guards and their camp. But Frank Seward was an old campaigner, and was not being tricked too far into the open. His men sought cover at the first sign of the rifle-fire, and found it behind the barge and floats that had been used for salvaging the reels.

Larry Galvin whistled up Patches. The pinto came up beside him. The scout levelled his rifle across the saddle, swung into his kak, and commanded:

"Line out toward your skirmishers, and we'll see how well McGrew likes to palaver."

Fosdick and his men hesitated, but Galvin prodded the leader with the end of his rifle barrel, drew the trigger to half-cock, and nudged Patches ahead. The pinto slammed his shoulder into the flank of Fosdick's horse. The mount skittered and sidled off.

Finally the men began moving reluctantly. When they came up on the open prairie and McGrew

caught sight of them, he ceased his own gunfire into the telegraph guards and shouted:

"What are you doing here, Fosdick? I'm depending on you!"

Larry Galvin loomed up on the flank then, his ready rifle weaving from his prisoners to the leader of the buffalo hunters, and said:

"Fosdick ain't taking orders from you right now. He's a sensible man. Maybe it would be a good idea if you were sensible, too."

Fury marked McGrew's face. But it was not clear to Galvin whether he was furious at his own men for bumbling his plans, or whether his anger was directed at Larry Galvin, who had outfoxed him now on two separate occasions.

McGrew made a menacing motion. Several of his supporters, in their rifle positions about him, looked as though they might like to take a part in the gun-smoke showdown, but Galvin said:

"This is no time for a rifle ruckus. Plain talk will clear the air here. Maybe we can clear things up without bloodshed!"

The leader of the buffalo hunters was a bit surprised at this temporising, and asked:

"How do you figure that out?"

"I'm not doing too much figuring," Galvin replied, "now that I've got you here to answer a few questions. Just what is the real reason for your interference with the telegraph? Who's paying you and your huskies for this job? Who gave you orders not to kill anyone if you could help it? Why is the bloody Pelt McGrew so worried about the fact that Fred Pierce may be dead?"

Gasps of amazement came from several of the men on both sides as Galvin bit off these questions with

shot-gun impact. Finally McGrew found his tongue and said:

"Like you know, if Pierce told you about our talk yesterday, this telegraph line is going to interfere with the migration of the buffalo. We figure that'll cost us a heap of money. We're entitled to be paid damages. And we're going to get them, too."

Larry Galvin snorted. "Pay you damages? You ought to be paying damages to the people of the United States. You call yourselves buffalo hunters. There's not much hunting involved in a deal like this. You're wasting one of our greatest natural resources, and for what?"

Even Frank Seward and the telegraph men perked up at this announcement. Pelt McGrew, in the business of taking furs for the past thirty years and more, studied Galvin to determine the basis for his reasoning. Then he asked:

"Just what are you getting at?"

"That's easy enough," Galvin explained. "These buffalo are the range cattle for the people who live on the plains and in the foothills of the Rockies. For hundreds, maybe even thousands of years, they've used them for meat, for shelter, for clothing, and for a myriad other things. No Indian ever killed more buffalo than he could properly use in a single season. He knew that they would be back the following year. He built up a part of his religion around the migration of the animals, and occasionally he saw his gods in the guise of the white buffalo that showed up. What do you do? One group of white buffalo hunters kills thousands of buffalo, strips the hides and leaves the meat to go to waste on the plains. Maybe he'll cut off an occasional tongue or collect the hump, but the balance will go to the coyotes and the buzzards.

There'll be a time when even men like you will regret this, McGrew."

"You sound like a preacher," McGrew retorted. "Right now I'm not interested in your psalm-singing. We want our hide wagon back—with the hides—and you'll turn it up right quick or this armistice will bust wide open and you'll be right in the middle of it."

Larry Galvin chuckled. The sound infuriated Pelt McGrew, and his fingers tightened on his rifle. Then Galvin said calmly:

"I'm glad you've come. If you've said your little piece, it is my turn. You've got a narrow view of this whole business. A lot of important men are tied up with this telegraph company, and they're not going to like the idea of a bunch of blackguards like you damaging their equipment. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the United States cavalry was out looking for you, Pelt. It might be mighty dangerous for you to ride into Fort Laramie with your buffalo skins. And you might tell the big moguls who are putting you up to this raiding business that it isn't going to pay off in good hard gold dinero, but will probably cost them their freedom or their lives."

"I don't think they're going to be worried about that," McGrew retorted briskly.

"Then you're admitting there are some big moguls behind you," Galvin declared with a laugh. "Tell them that we're expecting damages, and mighty heavy damages, too. You're not getting that hide wagon, the teams or the horses. We're holding them as part of the settlement. Now take your men and get out of here. And don't come back!"

Pelt McGrew studied his adversary for some moments. All about him his cohorts were standing

up with their rifles in their arms. Suddenly they dropped them to a level position, and McGrew said :

"You're going to figure out, right quick, Mister Galvin, that there are some times when you talk too much."

"What do you mean by that?" the scout inquired.

"I don't mind talking with a man while my mule skinnners and teamsters are coming up, and the knife men are taking their positions. It's a sign of real generalship." He laughed harshly.

Galvin looked across the river toward the spots where Frank Seward and his guards were holding their positions. Then the frontier scout replied:

"A good general thinks way beyond the present moment. I'd say that your skinnners and teamsters walked themselves into the middle of the same trap you've stepped in."

"Trap?" McGrew looked about him. All he could see were the thirty-odd men of his own crew. It was true that Fosdick and four of the others had been disarmed, and their weapons were on the ground some distance away. Otherwise it looked as though McGrew indeed held all of the cards.

"That's about it," Galvin replied serenely. "I assume from this display of strength that you've left only one or two men at your camp, and brought all of the others up here for this martial display."

Galvin's eyes rested on the familiar figure of the teamster whose wagon had been stolen. The man was scowling at him, and looked as though he would take a personal pleasure in ripping the scout limb from limb.

McGrew was uncertain. He had heard something of Galvin's reputation on the frontier.

"I'm calling your bluff!" Pelt finally insisted, level-

ling his gun at Galvin's middle. "Drop your rifle and climb down from your horse. We'll see whether Pierce and Seward have so much to say while we're holding you as a hostage. I'm a hard man, Galvin. And if I figured things weren't going my way, I'd truss you up the way you trussed up my teamster, and drop you into the middle of that telegraph camp with Sioux arrows thrust into you until you looked like a pincushion."

"Loud talk!" Galvin purred. "Loud talk! All right, Billings; take over!"

The last words were a crisp command which billowed out over the surroundings like the knell of doom. As they were spoken, mounted men loomed up all about the buffalo hunters. They were armed and well mounted, and George Billings, in the centre of the line, had his gun lined on McGrew's backbone.

A cheer went up from Seward and his men as the survey party put in its appearance, primed for trouble, and apparently in full command of the situation. McGrew looked at Galvin, then turned to study the grim visage of George Billings.

"Drop it, McGrew!" the scout said. "And tell your boys they'd be wise to do the same thing. We don't want to mess up the prairie."

There was no other course left open for the buffalo hunters. They released their holds upon their weapons and the guns clattered to the ground. Then Galvin swung down from his horse, calmly pouched his rifle in the saddle sheath and walked forward toward Pelt McGrew.

"I reckon you see how the land lies now. You've got two strikes on you, and not much more in the way of gear to help you out. If you are wise, you'll whip up your wagons and head for Fort Laramie. In

another day or so we'll have enough reinforcements out here to handle anything you can stir up. The telegraph line is going through! And you're not going to stop it! Now get!"

Larry Galvin slapped McGrew's horse on its rump. The animal reared back and almost unseated its rider. Then McGrew whirled it around and headed off toward the north. The other men of his crew followed in ragged disarray. Galvin waved a greeting to George Billings and remarked:

"It looks as though it worked out just about the way we figured it would. Thanks for the assist."

"It was a pleasure," Billings assured him. Several of the other surveyors had gathered around him, while others were keeping a wary eye on the retreating buffalo men. Then Billings concluded: "Some of the boys were downright unhappy because they missed the excitement last night. But I reckon this sort of makes up for it. They'll have something to tell their children and grandchildren."

"I'll bet they will," Galvin agreed. "But now that we've got all these extra firearms laying around here in the grass, it might be a good idea to collect them before they start to rust. I'm sure we can make use of them, particularly since Frank Seward tells me that they found several cases of ammunition in that hide wagon I drove off last night."

George Billings chuckled, ground-hitched his horse, and strode around the area with Galvin, collecting the guns discarded by the fleeing buffalo hunters.

CHAPTER SIX

LARRY GALVIN and Frank Seward were up early the next morning. Seward assumed responsibility for the wire-stringers, while Galvin remained behind to pack up the gear in the camp. The scout who had been checking the buffalo hunters' camp rode in just after daybreak and reported to Galvin.

"They were as snug as bugs in a rug," he declared. "They did a heap of talking. Some of them wanted to head out for Laramie right away, figuring we might move up on them and take over the rest of the hides. The others decided there was no danger of that. McGrew and a couple of his boys saddled their horses early this morning and rode off toward the east. The others were eating their breakfast and talking about pulling out for the trading post as soon as they were loaded."

"That sounds like a good sign," Galvin declared. "Get yourself some breakfast; then you can bed down in the hide wagon and take it easy for the rest of the day."

The youth thanked Galvin and moved away.

Activity around the camp was varied during the morning. The clean-up squad moved out with all of the equipment, including the hide wagon, but left behind one cart and a team for it, as well as the single mounts of Larry Galvin and a pair of the telegraph men.

For the present occasion, the cart had been built

up with a complete box, which was made comfortable and not too bouncy with buffalo robes and Fred Pierce's soogans. Galvin and his two helpers assisted the foreman into his improvised buggy shortly after lunch. Then Galvin saddled Patches, swung aboard, and led the way along the trail leading to Julesburg.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when Larry put his binoculars to his eyes for a periodic inspection of the skyline. From force of habit, he studied the area all about him. To the east, about two miles ahead, coming up out of a coulee, and stretching out on the prairie trail like a winding brown snake, he spotted the advance units of the supply train.

"There they are!" he said with a sweep of his hand.

The man in the wagon and the other two horsebackers followed his pointing finger and spotted the train. Pierce wanted to speed up the wagon, but Larry swung in alongside the off-horse of the team, and gripped the reins close to the bit.

"We're doing all right as we are," he insisted. "There's no hurry."

The quartette resumed its ambling pace, and Galvin began studying other parts of the horizon.

After another ten or fifteen minutes he spotted three riders on the South Platte's north bank. They were partly sheltered by a grove of trees, and were on the west side of the cover so they would not be visible to the supply outfit.

Galvin stirred up plenty of dust as he cut off the road and headed for the river bank. The three riders finally spotted him. They paused momentarily as though deciding upon their course, then the trio headed northward at a fast trot.

With the opposition accounted for at least tem-

porarily, Galvin turned his attention to the supply train. At the head of the riders and pole wagons he discovered the familiar, burly figure of Alfred Preston, the supply boss. Preston was a huge man, and the grey animal he was riding looked like a truck horse. Galvin waved a greeting which was returned by the supply men. The scout's searching eye then checked the other portions of the complement. The pole wagons, each one of them made up of two-wheel units, and carrying from nine to thirteen poles, stretched back along the trail for a mile or more. Each one of the pole wagons was driven by one man, and escorted by three others. So the supply outfit was a formidable-looking aggregation.

At the rear of the poles there were covered wagons with boxed gear and equipment. Beyond them, far enough back so that the rising dust would not be uncomfortable, was a buggy with its top up, surrounded by about a dozen men on single mounts.

With all of this accounted for, Galvin turned to Pierce and said:

"It looks as though one of the big shots has left his polished desk and chair in Kaycee, and come out here to look us over. We'll sure have to be on our good behaviour now."

Pierce's face clouded. For a moment Galvin thought it might be from pain; then the foreman said:

"Maybe this is trouble for me. You think I've done a good job, don't you, Galvin? They'll probably ask you for an opinion."

"You can count on me," Galvin assured him. Then Preston was up with them and wheeling to the side of the trail to talk to Pierce, Galvin and their companions.

"I got your letter from Bill Cody," the supply boss

said calmly. "Judging from what you didn't write, there must have been a heap of excitement. Anything new stirring?"

Pierce shrugged. Galvin said :

"They came at us again last night, but I think we did for them for good that time. McGrew and some of his boys were dogging your trail, but when they spotted us about a quarter of an hour back, they headed north. I don't reckon they'll figure we're fair game any more, now that your outfit is joining up with us."

Alfred Preston nodded his agreement. Then he turned back to Pierce and remarked:

"We've brought along a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" Pierce looked up with a puzzled expression. "What sort of a surprise?"

"Back in the buggy. A good friend of yours. A pretty young lady," Alfred Preston explained.

Pierce's mouth dropped open. He tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. Galvin and the two other men from the pole camp chuckled, and this appeared to break the tension, for Pierce finally managed:

"Susan Dillard?"

"That's the lady's name, all right," Preston assured him. "Came right out from Scottsbluff as fast as she could, when she heard about your being shot. I think that's right nice of her, don't you?"

"I'll say it is," Pierce replied emphatically.

There was an exchange of small talk as the pole wagons and the supply vehicles meandered by. Then the buggy approached. Susan and her father were seated on the buggy seat, the man holding the reins.

Galvin looked at the horsemen who were following the buggy and bringing up the rear of the train.

He recognized all of them as men who had come out with supplies before. Several were surveyors' helpers who had been back to Julesburg for a periodic break and were now taking up their jobs again. But one of them was a complete stranger.

Suddenly Pierce called to Galvin. He saw, then, that the buggy had been pulled off the road, and was drawn up alongside the cart in which Pierce was riding.

Susan had climbed down from her vehicle, and was being helped into the cart with the young engineer. Fred Pierce was holding Susan's hand to assist her into the cart, and he looked up into her face as he said:

"I'm delighted to see you, Susan girl. But why did you come all the way out here into this wild country?"

"I heard you were severely wounded, and I was frightened half to death," she declared briskly. "I've come out here to nurse you. Father objected mightily, but then he doesn't know too much about matters of this kind."

She turned around to face the scout, appearing to see him for the first time. A cordial smile crossed her face, and she sent a beaming look in his direction.

"How about it?" she asked. "Was he badly hurt, Mr. Galvin?"

"Pretty bad, I'd say," Galvin replied. "But I'm sure he'll recover. He'd probably pine away if we tried to take him away from his telegraph poles and gear. You know how that is."

"I certainly do," the girl assured him. Then her father broke in:

"Are we going to stay out here all night and talk over the health of your boy friend and the future of the telegraph business?"

"Not at all, Father," Susan replied briskly. Then

she was taking the reins from Fred's willing hands, and flipping the rumps of the horses as she guided the cart back on to the trail.

When the entire train was again in motion, Larry Galvin saluted the girl and her father, then reined in Patches and trotted toward the head of the column. He was conscious of someone coming along behind him, but he did not pay any particular attention until he was passing the first pole wagon and joining Alfred Preston.

He had an opportunity to look back then, and saw that the other rider was the stranger. Preston greeted Galvin pleasantly, then moved ahead enough to permit the newcomer to join them. The rider introduced himself:

"I'm Harry Burton," he said. "Are you in charge of this operation?"

"Not exactly," Larry Galvin told him. "Fred Pierce is the engineer in charge of the whole works between Julesburg and Denver. I'm the chief scout. I shuttle between the surveyors in the front of the parade, the supply men in the rear, and spend most of my time with the pole-setters and wire-men in between. What can we do for you, Mister Burton? Looking for a job?"

Burton smiled, then replied:

"Not exactly. I'm out here as a friend of Susan Dillard's. I felt that someone should look after her in this wild country of yours."

"I agree," said Galvin. "But I should think Fred Pierce would be the proper man for the job. After all, she's going to marry him, isn't she?"

Burton sniffed. "Perhaps she is. And then again, maybe she isn't. I might have something to say about that."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two hours later found the supply train and its escort and guests approaching the Platte River ford where the buffalo hunters' raid had taken place. Except for patches of charred ground and burned grass, and some sign of the blackened ashes, there was little to indicate what had happened here. The main body of the camp had been moved ahead.

Some of the wagon guards and a few of the out-riders turned aside from the trail and surveyed the surroundings. They asked questions of Galvin and the two pole men, and then Preston said:

"It looks as though you sure did yourselves proud along here. The boys back in Kaycee will be writing your names in the history books."

Galvin shrugged, then moved out past the battleground to the new trail that paralleled the wires and poles moving west to Denver. The remaining five miles were covered in a little more than an hour.

The pole camp was spread out in the area formerly occupied by the surveyors. Several of the surveying group were also on hand. The camp had a primitive look, with its buffalo hide tepees. Except for the pole wagons, the reel units and the other signs of construction, it might have been mistaken for the crude hunting camp of the Sarcees or the Sioux.

The operation of parking the pole vehicles and yarding the animals was carried through without interruption as the Dillard buggy, the Pierce wagon

and the horses of the mounted men were moved out of the trail. Susan was helped out of the cart, and then several of the men looked after Pierce, carrying him to the tent which had been set aside for him, and making him comfortable there.

Susan followed in their wake. Her father walked along behind the group and Galvin watched the parade. Finally Mr. Dillard turned to him and said:

"This is a smelly little set-up, isn't it?"

"I guess buffalo hides do have a peculiar odour," the scout agreed. "But they're shelter of a sort, and it does get downright cold out here at night. There are probably some canvas tents in the supply wagons, however, and I'm sure we can set up one of them for your daughter and yourself."

"Splendid," Dillard declared. "First rate. I'd appreciate that very much." Then he forced a smile and remarked: "Perhaps I don't have the same pioneering spirit as my daughter."

Galvin returned the smile and remarked: "I think I understand, sir. We'll do our best to make you comfortable."

The scout hurried off to look after the matter.

The evening was a busy one; the newcomers in the supply train fraternized with the workers in the pole camp and survey group.

Galvin was busy with the pickets, and also rode out on his Patches pony to check on the area ahead to the survey camp and beyond, so that there would be no delay in putting down the line at full speed, now that the new supplies had arrived.

When he came back to the camp it was around ten o'clock. There was a light in Pierce's tepee, and Galvin headed in this direction. Pierce called out:

"Is that you, Galvin?"

"Yes, Fred," the scout replied.

"Come on in," invited the young engineer.

Galvin ducked his head and moved into the buffalo-skin shelter. Pierce was propped up in a semi-sitting position, and he looked up at Galvin as the rugged frontiersman settled on a three-legged stool beside him.

"How's it going?" Pierce inquired.

"Well enough," Galvin assured him. "I've checked on the line they'll be working tomorrow and the next day. Doesn't look like anything troublesome there. As we get closer to Fort Morgan, we can expect to see patrols from the fort, and I think that'll discourage any sort of renegade, white or red.

"I hope so," said Pierce. Then he asked unexpectedly: "Larry, have you ever been in love?"

Galvin was surprised by this question, and a bit confused. The scout shrugged.

"Not really in love, I reckon. I've played at it a bit, but apparently I never convinced the young lady in question." He forced a smile.

"What do you think of Harry Burton?" asked Pierce.

This time Galvin was a bit more prepared. He studied Pierce carefully, then replied:

"I'm mighty suspicious of his motives. What do you know about him?"

"Not much," Pierce admitted. "Only what Susan has been telling me here this evening. I never even heard of him before this afternoon."

Galvin did not want to probe into Pierce's private life, nor did he want to interfere in anything in which Susan Dillard might be involved. But he did have a certain measure of responsibility in the matter of the telegraph crew. Pierce was obviously weighing his

own remarks, and Galvin waited calmly, rolling a cigarette in his fingers, twisting it carefully, and lighting it from the red coals of a fire which kept the tent warm from its rock nest in the centre of the floor.

"Burton appears to be a well-to-do business man," Pierce finally resumed. "Susan doesn't seem to know whether he's acquired his money on his own, or whether it's from a family business which he has taken over. In any case he has set his cap for Susan, and has spent much of his time trying to convince her that she'd be much better off marrying him than throwing in her lot with a struggling engineer who'll never make a success of things in any case."

Pierce paused for breath. Galvin used the opportunity to remark:

"I don't think you've got too much to worry about where Burton is concerned. If Susan wasn't interested in your welfare, she wouldn't have come out here to be with you."

"I'm flattered by the whole business. She tells me, too, that she tried to get Harry Burton to stay back in Ogallala or Scottsbluff, so he wouldn't be a bother."

There was silence in the tepee for a while; then Galvin whispered:

"Maybe I'll be able to help you out with this Burton business. I've got a hunch that I'm going to see a lot of him in the days ahead. I'll keep you posted if I do."

"Do that," Pierce agreed. Then Galvin made him comfortable and said:

"I think I'll turn in now. A good night's sleep will do a lot for both of us."

During the next week or ten days Larry Galvin spent many of his evenings with the Dillards and

Fred Pierce. The older man was getting restless about his business interest: but when the need presented itself, he was able to keep in touch with his partners over the telegraph lines. Abraham Lincoln had been elected to the presidency, and was on his way to Washington.

There was a good deal of tension all over the eastern half of the United States, and it was inevitable that some of it would filter out on to the frontier.

Galvin and Burton were riding out ahead of the surveyors one bright afternoon when the scout became conscious of a rider coming toward them from the east. The haste with which the man was pressing his horse was a clear indication of the urgency of his mission.

"Do you think something might have gone wrong at the camp?" Burton asked. "Some trouble to Susan or her father?"

"Nothing like that," Galvin reassured him. "That's Bill Cody, and he's beating out the miles on his thoroughbred, carrying the Pony Mail."

"Lively lad, all right. I've seen him in camp before." Burton relaxed a bit.

Ordinarily Bill Cody would have gone sweeping by with his mochilas bobbing behind him, but this time he reined in his horse and shouted:

"War! Galvin! It's war!"

"War?" replied Galvin in some puzzlement. "With whom?"

Cody explained: "The Confederates have fired on Fort Sumter. The North and the South are going to war with each other. Lincoln is calling for seventy-five thousand volunteers."

Then Cody was waving his hat, pelting the neck of his horse and galloping off toward Denver.

The frontiersman reined in his horse and studied his riding companion.

"What do you make of that?" he asked. "And what does it mean to the telegraph line?"

"I don't know, exactly," Burton remarked.

"Maybe we'd better head back for camp, and see just what it does mean," Galvin suggested.

They turned their horses and retraced their steps.

As they came to the first of the survey markers, it was obvious that the telegraph men had also knocked off work for the balance of the day. The transits and guides were gone, but the markers showed clearly where the surveyors had concluded their operations.

There were only a few men at the advance camp, looking after the equipment. They waved to Galvin and Burton as they jogged between the tents. Billings and his other men were at the Pierce camp.

The scout and the eastern business man had another hour's ride ahead of them before they caught sight of the activity at the pole area. The men in this camp were all gathered about one of the big wagons. Frank Seward was talking to them. Fred Pierce was seated in a camp chair close by. Mr. Dillard and his daughter were on the seat of the buggy.

Galvin increased his pace, and Burton moved up behind him. When they came into the camp they made their way immediately to the centre of activity. Fred Pierce looked up at Galvin, and it was obvious that he was relieved by his arrival.

The scout swung down from his horse, moved through the workers toward Pierce and asked:

"Any orders, boss?"

Pierce straightened up, looked into the clear, cool eyes of the scout and replied:

"I'll be busy on the wires to Kansas City and St. Louis. I'll be wanting you to take charge of everything here until the whole set-up is clarified. Your orders will be followed as though they were mine. I'll back your judgment one hundred per cent." He turned to the men around him and asked:

"Is there anyone here who doesn't understand that?"

There was a restless movement among the men, but none of them challenged the dictum of their boss. Galvin shook hands with Pierce and said:

"Thank you, Fred. I think we'll be able to whip this, just like we've whipped the other obstacles that have threatened us. But we'll probably have to take some drastic action."

"Take it!" Pierce insisted.

Lawrence Galvin climbed up on to the tail gate of the wagon and looked out over the heads of the men before him. His gaze held on the face of Susan Dillard. She was gripping her father's hand, and it looked as though both of them had been fighting a difficult battle. Finally Galvin cleared his throat and spoke.

"Gentlemen, we're all friends as we stand here now facing each other. Something has come up, however, which may well make some of us deadly enemies.

"One of the first things that President Lincoln will do is place the means of communication under the direction of the United States Army. That means that this telegraph line will be an important pulse of the military within a very short time. Therefore we can do but one thing here and now. We've got to separate the sheep from the goats. All of those whose sympathies are with the North will step to the right

of the wagon. Those who favour the South will move to the left of the wagon!"

Galvin's hand dropped instinctively to the butt of his right hand gun. There was no menace in the movement. It was merely that he was treading on dangerous ground, and did not know when a bomb-shell might explode about him. A number of the telegraph men whispered among themselves; then they began to break and move to either side of the wagon.

When the division had been made, about sixty of the telegraph men were on the side of the North. Fifteen or twenty were on the side of the South. The minority group was obviously wondering about its fate.

The scout set their minds at ease.

"You men who have declared your allegiance to the North can take one of two courses. You can remain here and work with us to complete the telegraph line, or if you feel that your place is in the Union Army, you may proceed to Ogallala to enlist in the army. Those of you who feel that your loyalties rest with the South can have your choice, as well. You may head east to the nearest Army recruiting station of the Confederate Forces, or you may head westward to Denver. The choice is yours."

This decision appeared to meet with the approval of all the men involved. Almost in a body, the Union sympathizers moved forward, and Frank Seward, speaking for them, announced:

"We'll take the telegraph line through to Denver, and beyond if need be. We're sticking with you, Galvin!"

"What about our pay?" inquired one of the Southern sympathizers.

Galvin chuckled at the ironic nature of this ques-

tion. Naturally, if the Southerners were paid, it would be in good American dollars, or gold double eagles, and this would mean that they would have to take an outlawed currency into the Confederacy with them. The scout didn't know the answer to this question, and turned to look at the bleak-faced Pierce.

The young engineer nodded his head slowly and announced:

"I think all of you are aware of the fact that the quarterly payroll and expense money for the handling of the next section of the line is due here within the next day or two. You'll need at least that much time to straighten out your affairs here. As soon as the money is here, you'll be paid. I guarantee that."

There was some grumbling among the men, but most of them were familiar enough with the way Pierce did business to know that he did not have enough ready cash to disburse it to them immediately. Neither Galvin nor the young engineer had anything more to say, so the little party gradually broke up, and the men who were going to continue to work for the rest of the day headed out along the line.

Susan Dillard climbed down from the buggy and came over to Fred Pierce, saying:

"You've tired yourself out with this whole business, Fred. I'd go lie down if I were you."

Pierce permitted himself to be led off with an apologetic look in the direction of Larry Galvin. He said:

"I'll see you tonight, and we can talk things over. In the meantime, you've made an excellent start."

Harry Burton gripped Galvin's arm and said: "Is there any way I can help, Galvin. This business sort

of gets into your blood, doesn't it? I've come to realize that it's more than wood and wire and bottle-glass insulators."

"Yes, it does," Galvin agreed, brushing aside the offer of aid for the time being, at least. Burton hesitated for a moment, then walked away. The frontier scout moved about the camp, and finally wound up at the chuck wagon. He was anxious about the loyalties of the cook, for without him, the job of building the line would run into almost insurmountable difficulties.

Cookie Grange looked up as Galvin paused beside his "office," and let some gravy drip from the end of a long, wooden mixing spoon. Then he asked:

"Anything wrong, Galvin?"

"Not that I know of," Galvin reassured him. "I'm just wondering whether you're stringing along with us."

"You mean you're firing me?" Grange asked in dismay.

"Not me," Galvin said. "I thought maybe you'd be up and quitting us, now that the boys are taking sides in the war."

"War?" There was a puzzled expression on Cookie's face. "What war?"

"The Rebels fire on Fort Sumter," Galvin told him.

"Fort Sumter? Where's that?"

"Down in South Carolina some place," the scout explained to him.

"South Carolina?" Cookie repeated. "Well, then everything's all right. I don't know a soul in South Carolina. Like as not I don't have kith or kin or even a good friend anywhere east of Ogallala. I'm happy where I am. Let's keep it that way."

"Suits me," declared Galvin.

Galvin left the cook a few minutes later, convinced that the situation was all secure in the culinary department. He checked over the teamsters to make certain that the men who would be leaving from that branch of the work crew would not cripple the free movement of poles, wire and other supplies.

The evening meal that night was a sobering experience. The men in the various groups did not consciously ignore each other, but they remained by themselves so that there was no temptation to blow off steam.

The camp quieted down early, and all the men except those on guard turned in without delay.

Larry Galvin headed for Pierce's tent before seeking out his own soogans. He found the engineer there with Susan Dillard. She looked up at him, smiled and winked encouragement. Pierce was able to move around now, and he had one of the telegraph sounders set up on a work table in the centre of his tent. A tap from the main telegraph line came to the pole of the tent, and down it to his station.

"Anything new, boss?" Galvin inquired.

Pierce picked up a handful of message forms and pushed them toward the frontiersman. One of the longer ones was from the big boss in St. Louis. It congratulated Fred Pierce on the progress he was working, in spite of his handicap, and assured him that it would not be forgotten. It pointed out the new importance of the telegraph line. One sentence jumped out at Galvin and sent a thrill through him. It said:

PRESIDENT LINCOLN BELIEVES THAT THE
OVERLAND TELEGRAPH WILL KEEP CALIFORNIA
AND HER GOLD ON THE SIDE OF THE UNION STOP
ESSENTIAL THEREFORE THAT WE COME THROUGH

Keeping California and the Union together was important.

"They're putting on extra building crews both east and west of Denver," Pierce pointed out. "I was a little disappointed at that, but I can see the importance of it. We can no longer afford to be casual about this. Washington has to be in touch with the far corners of the nation at all times. We can no longer depend upon the Pony Express."

Galvin nodded his agreement. Then he said:

"I'd say our contingent is in good shape; and once we're able to pay off we'll be a cohesive, smoothly working unit again."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

GALVIN rode into the camp on Patches one evening, several days after the news of Fort Sumter, and could see that there was an air of tension about the place. He turned to look for Fred Pierce, but the young engineer was nowhere in sight. The flap was down over his tent, which meant that he was either asleep, or was working over his charts and reports and did not wish to be disturbed. Failing the opportunity of clearing up the matter with Pierce, the frontier scout turned to Frank Seward and asked:

"What's been going on around here?"

"Burton has been acting up," Seward replied calmly enough.

"In what way?" Galvin asked in some surprise.

"With the girl," Seward explained. "Spoke to her father for a while, showed him messages about guerilla bands on the trails to the east, and explained that this camp would be a logical strategic target; that Susan would be in danger. Dillard was inclined to agree with Burton, but Susan is determined that she is going to stay here."

Larry smiled. In the weeks since Susan Dillard had come into the camp, he had had ample evidence of her determination, and he knew that Burton had unconsciously been manoeuvred into a position that must be distasteful to him. If he persisted, and Susan refused to fall in with his plans, Burton might well loosen the ties that still bound him to the girl. By

appearing to press her, he might make her turn against him completely.

"Why is Pierre sulking in his tent?" Galvin wanted to know.

"I guess you might call it frustration," Seward replied. "He looked and acted as though he would have liked nothing better than to take violent action against Burton, but he's just not physically equipped for anything like that. Naturally it was embarrassing to him. Some of the men, myself included, were willing to go at Burton for the boss, but he didn't want anything like that. Only the Confederate sympathizers seemed to be amused by the goings on."

"I can imagine that," Galvin concluded. Then he moved toward the rope corral to unsaddle his Patches horse and give him a feeding of oats. Several of the men looking after the horses greeted him pleasantly, and were obviously interested in what he was going to do about the unrest in the camp.

As he had expected, neither the Dillards nor Burton put in an appearance at the evening meal. Galvin ate a filling supper with Seward and some of the other subordinate leaders, and talked idly about the progress of the work during the day. Then when the smoking period was over, and he could properly excuse himself from the group, he strode in the direction of Burton's tent. He called for admittance, and Burton invited him to "come in."

Galvin slipped aside the flap, moved into the tent, and looked down at the young eastern business man. The visitor studied the scout, then asked pleasantly:

"What can I do for you?"

Galvin lost no time in getting to the point.

"Mr. Burton," he said, "I'm sorry to have to say

this, but don't you think you've just about worn out your welcome in this camp?"

Obviously this was what Burton had anticipated from the frontiersman. He looked at him quickly, then asked :

"Did Pierce send you?"

"Pierce knows nothing about my being here," Galvin assured him. "But you know that he has given me *carte blanche* to run this camp. I'm in a position where I've got to take action."

Burton laughed pleasantly, then replied gently:

"Mr. Galvin, I'm afraid you're becoming unnecessarily excited over a matter that is more or less personal between Mr. Pierce and myself. I have no intention of interfering with your command of the telegraph men. My interest, as it always has been, is exclusively in Susan Dillard. I'm looking out for her welfare, and nothing else. I'm sure you can understand the reasons for that."

"I think I do," Galvin admitted gallantly, realizing that Harry Burton was cleverly taking the initiative away from him. "At the same time you must appreciate that we cannot have a divided interest in this camp, if we are going to carry through the job assigned to us."

"My idea exactly," Burton agreed promptly, "and since it would appear that Susan Dillard is the complicating factor, I have a suggestion that would probably take care of the matter without difficulty. I'm sure that if you would support me in the matter of the potential dangers in a camp of this kind during wartime, Susan would welcome the opportunity to travel with me and her father to Fort Morgan, or on to Denver. Then you would have nothing to interfere with your telegraph line."

Larry Galvin chuckled, patted Burton on the shoulder and said:

"I'm sure that would fix everything, but it wouldn't sit very well with Fred Pierce, and from some of the things I've heard around here, it might not be altogether satisfactory to Susan Dillard, either. But I'll talk to both of them, and see if we can't work this out to the satisfaction of everyone. Good night, Mr. Burton, and keep out of trouble!"

Galvin was heading in the direction of the Pierce tent, where silhouettes on the siding told him that the Dillards were visiting, when he became suddenly aware of the sound of galloping hoofs coming in from the east. He turned and hurried toward the edge of the camp.

Before he had reached the picket line, he heard a stern voice call out:

"Halt, who's there!"

The question was not answered by any words, but by the swift tattoo of a bugle. This was the signal of the Pony Express rider when he was coming into a relay station.

The guard stepped out of the way as the quick-running thoroughbred carrying the jockey-sized rider almost ran him down. Then the Pony Express rider was reining in his mount, and Galvin recognized the familiar form of Bill Cody.

The rider was almost out of breath, but finally he found sufficient words to scream hoarsely:

"Trouble on the back trail, about ten miles out! The payroll detail you've been expecting is pretty badly battered. The messenger is dead. Several of his guards are badly wounded, and the satchel containing the payroll is missing. They flagged me down and asked me to send help!"

Almost everyone in the camp heard the words as they were mouthed by the Pony Express carrier; then he was heeling his horse, clattering through the camp and out onto the trail which wound into the west.

Fred Pierce called to Galvin and said:

"I can't go out there now. Will you look after it?"

Galvin nodded silently as he looked over Pierce's shoulder, and saw the amazed expressions on the faces of Susan Dillard and her father. Seward and a dozen of his men were already running toward the rope corral for their horses. The scout knew that they would gear his Patches horse, too.

Larry Galvin put an arm on Pierce's shoulder and said:

"I'm on my way. But how bad is it? How much do you figure they've made off with?"

Pierce lowered his voice to a whisper, then replied:

"It's plenty bad. The pouch contained about seventy-five thousand dollars in specie. Not only payroll money, but money for supplies to be purchased between here and Denver. This will really be a terrific blow."

"I'll handle it," Galvin assured him. "Take it easy."

Then he was running toward the gathering posse, grasping the reins of his pinto, and swinging up to take the eastern trail.

Galvin, Seward and their companions lost no time in beating their way back along the ten miles to the rendezvous with the battered payroll escort. Their horses were well-fed, and had been resting for several hours, so they were willing to give their best.

Long before they arrived at the scene of the robbery, they could see flickering fires on the prairie; and moving about before them, casting a strange

silhouette, were members of the guard. Apparently the hale and hearty ones were looking after the wounded.

As the horsemen approached a rifle-armed guard challenged them, and Galvin identified himself. A smooth-shaven fellow in his mid-twenties, with shock still evident on his face, gripped Galvin's stirrup and said:

"I'm sure glad you're here. I'm Bert Brady, in charge of this detail. It don't look as though I was very capable, does it?"

"I don't think you're to blame," Galvin reassured him. "This is a rough country, and bigger men than you have been broken trying to buck it. Let's look after your wounded first."

Brady led the way to the scene of the shambles. Several of the first aid men looked up. Seward and his men remained mounted while Galvin dropped to the ground. He went from one to the other of the wounded men, knelt to help several of them, and congratulated the men on their work with the others. Then he paused alongside the dead messenger, took off his hat slowly, and mumbled a prayer.

"Tough luck," he said to Brady, who was following him around like a dutiful spaniel.

"They hit us so fast, we didn't have much chance," Brady explained. "The first shot they fired killed Broderick, the messenger; then they were right in the middle of us, and drove off his horse. We opened fire on them, and managed to bring down three of them, but the money was gone. They headed out into the darkness, and when they had gone a quarter of a mile or so, they began firing their rifles into us. We had to seek shelter for our own protection."

Galvin nodded his understanding. Then he said:

"We'll get the wounded into our camp. It might be a good idea to bury the dead right here. There's a woman in camp, and we wouldn't want her to see the carnage that has taken place here. If Broderick has a friend or family, he'll be safe here until they move him."

The ill-fated messenger was wrapped into a blanket and tucked into his soogans. Then several of his companions reverently carried his body to a cutbank above the South Platte River. The bodies of the three dead raiders were dragged unceremoniously by their heels to a nearby position. Then the posse men and the payroll guards toppled the loose dirt down over the bodies and piled stones on them to mark the spot and protect the bodies.

Frank Seward came over to Galvin and asked:

"What do we do now, boss?"

"Those bandits have probably scattered all over the plains like a flock of quail at a shotgun blast. I've got a hunch it would be wiser to try and pick up their trail in the morning. We've got to get these wounded fellows into some sort of shelter. Let's climb aboard our cayuses, and head for home. We can talk along the way."

This plan was agreed upon, and moments later they were moving along at a slow jog trot in the direction of the telegraph camp. Bert Brady rode between Galvin and Seward, and as they opened the distance between themselves and the ambush, Galvin prompted gently:

"Now tell us a little more about this business, and give us a description of the raiders."

Brady nodded his head, cleared his throat and said:

"Well, like you know, we've been on the trail for

more than a week. We were extremely careful when we went into camp, setting up pickets, and burying the money so even if the camp were raided, it would be almost impossible for anyone to find it. Broderick was careful and conscientious that way. We had a hunch once or twice that someone was in the camp, but the burying trick apparently fooled them."

Galvin nodded; then Brady continued:

"When we were at Fort Morgan, the commanding officer there asked us if we would like to have a stronger escort. Broderick didn't seem to think we needed it, so we came on ahead as we were. Ordinarily we might have camped about five or ten miles back, because we usually turned into camp before dark, so we could get our pickets set out and dispose of the money. Because we were so close to your outfit, however, we talked it over and decided to ride on through tonight. I guess it wasn't such a good idea," he finished lamely.

Larry weighed this information, then asked:

"What about the raiders? Did you recognize any of them?"

Brady was more relaxed now, and he gave a rather detailed description of the two men who grabbed the reins of the horse that had borne the murdered Broderick. As the details were etched into the picture by Brady, Galvin looked at Seward and asked:

"Sound familiar to you, Frank?"

"You bet it does," Seward replied. "Pelt McGrew, as sure as you're a foot tall."

"My idea exactly. And it looks as though all his missionary stuff about fighting to save the buffalo is a lot of gabble. He and his buffalo hunters are mixed up in something a heap sight more damaging than that. I think we ought to plan on putting another

spike in his wheel. Apparently it takes more than one lesson before he's well taught."

Seward nodded agreement. Galvin rode a bit ahead with him, and gave him some instructions, concluding:

"I'll be with you in a while. Take the casualties into camp and bed them down. I've got a little chore to look after."

Seward nodded, signalled to Brady and the other men, and galloped off on the western trail. Galvin made his way to the telegraph line, opened up his saddle bags and took out a pair of climbers and a telegraph sounder. With his climbers in place, he moved up the pole, braced himself at the top and cut in on the line. When he had completed the connection to Fort Morgan, he sent along the details of the raid on the payroll party.

Apparently, from the reaction of the operator, Fred Pierce had already sent through a flash on it, and this was already going through to the head office in St. Louis, so that another payroll could be made up and sent forward from the nearest depository. Larry Galvin sketched in the details, answered a few questions, and then asked the Army to send out an alarm for Pelt McGrew and his men.

When he had completed this, he disconnected his set, climbed down the pole, repacked his gear and swung aboard Patches. His telegraph operating had taken him a good half-hour, and the riders were well ahead of him by the time he got back on to the trail. While riding along he considered Pelt McGrew and the raid on the payroll messenger.

He was forced to one obvious conclusion. Only the men working in the telegraph camp were aware of the fact that the money was coming over the trail. And

only someone close to Pierce would know just when the shipment of currency was due. This meant that there was a traitor in camp who was in touch with McGrew and his men.

Not long afterward, Galvin sighted the campfires, and saw that there was a great deal of activity going on. He was grateful for this, for it would mean that the renegade in the group would not be able to leave without a chance of being discovered. He would have to wait until things quieted down.

Galvin came into the camp, was challenged by the alert guards, and turned his horse over to one of them. He strode in the direction of the tents grouped near the centre of the site. Here he could see Fred Pierce reclining in a tilted camp chair, and listening to Bert Brady. Nearby stood Arthur Dillard, Harry Burton, Frank Seward and several of the other men.

Galvin's first thought was of the girl. Then he saw that one of the larger tents, used as a dining hall in bad weather, had been converted into a first aid tent, and Susan was there with a group of men, looking after the injured and making them comfortable while Cookie Grange ran around among them with a bucket of coffee and a pot of soup.

When the scout joined the group, Fred Pierce looked up at him with troubled eyes and asked:

"How does it look to you, Larry?"

Galvin studied the men around the young engineer, then shook his head disconsolately and replied:

"I reckon it's gone for good. They've got a good hour's start before we ever got there, so they could be anywhere from ten to twenty miles from here at this time—north, south, east or west. How would you go about locating them?"

Pierce's shoulders sagged.

One of the Southern sympathizers pushed forward and asked:

"Is it true that the money's gone, and gone for good?"

"Obviously you've heard Galvin," Pierce replied. "There's nothing else to be said."

"We're through, then," the Southerner replied. "We've waited around here for things to shape up. But we can't wait any longer. Give us payment orders and we'll light out of here."

"That would be all right, if you were going back east," Pierce agreed readily enough. "But you fellows spoke of going to Denver. We don't have any credits in Denver. I don't know how long it would take for you to cash your payment orders. A part of this money that has been stolen from us was intended to be used for setting up credits in Denver. Now we've got to make other plans!"

Larry Galvin broke in:

"I've already wired St. Louis, given them all the details on the robbery as I got them from Bert Brady, and asked them to replace the money shipment. They'll probably send it along by the Pony Express this time, and with stronger escorts. I'd say it could be here in three or four days."

Fred Pierce nodded his agreement and remarked:

"When I sent in my preliminary report, right after Cody left here and the posse went back to the scene of the robbery, I recommended a new money shipment. I'm sure the backers will come through with it."

The men moved to their bunks, rolled up in their soogans, or found their sleeping quarters in their wagons; Pierce and Galvin were left alone.

Pierce asked: "What are you going to do, Larry?"

Galvin looked into the tired eyes of the young engineer, then replied:

"Just like the rest of the folks, I'm going to dig out my soogans, roll up in them and get a good night's sleep. And I'd advise you to do the same thing. We're going to need plenty of vocal ammunition in the morning, and a tired brain is a sluggish one."

A wan smile crossed Pierce's features, but he conceded: "I guess you're right."

Galvin bade him good night, moved off around the side of the tent and out of Pierce's view. He stopped at the first aid tent long enough to look over the dressings of the wounded men, and to congratulate Susan Dillard on the good job she was doing, then resumed his journey toward his horse.

He whispered to the animal in the darkness, then took his soogans from his wreck pile, spread them out in his accustomed position on the ground under a buffalo hide lean-to, and knelt down beside them. He kicked off his boots and stood them close to where his head would rest. Then he hung his floppy hat on a stick which held the corner of the lean-to.

Next he rummaged around in his war bag, brought out some dirty clothing and bits of torn coat and blanket cloth which he was saving for another soogan when he could get someone to sew it together for him. He took this and stuffed it into his sleeping roll, making it look like a sleeping Galvin.

Then his fingers lifted the flap of one of his saddle bags and brought out a pair of moccasins that had been fashioned for him by a patient Crow Indian squaw. He found a head band which would hold his long hair back and keep it from blowing in his face,

while leaving his ears free to pick up the sounds of the night about him.

These preparations completed, Gálvin slipped out of the camp, evaded the guards without too much trouble, then made his way to a promontory about a hundred yards from the camp and rested his back against a rock.

CHAPTER NINE

LARRY GALVIN was gambling on the fact that if the renegade planned to leave the guarded camp in the middle of the night, he would move out on foot. This complicated matters a bit, for it would mean that the suspect could creep out of the camp at almost any point, and with little chance of being observed. If the scout had had sufficient time at his disposal, he would have arranged matters so that the horse corral would have been lightly guarded and the traitor given an opportunity to use his horse.

The lights of the fires in the camp blinked out; the red glowing coals turned from red to black. Lamps went out in the tents as late talkers finally decided to turn in.

As complete silence enveloped him, Galvin found himself becoming more excited and more alert. Then his attention was suddenly brought around to the horse corral which had been in his thoughts only a few moments before.

Two or three of the horses had apparently gotten loose from their picket ropes, and they began drifting off into the darkness. Suddenly a voice called out:

"Hey, Hal, what's going on with those horses?"

"Looks like a couple of them got loose," replied Hal. "We'd better get them rounded up, before the whole kit and caboodle of them are on the run and halfway to Denver."

"Think we need any help?" asked the other guard.

"Nope," came Hal's reply. "We don't want to

rouse everybody. Seward will probably tear our heads off when he hears about this."

Larry watched the operation with interest, and his first impulse was to try and follow the sounds of the horse chase in the semi-darkness. Then it suddenly occurred to him that this was some sort of a trick. Horses did not suddenly become loosened from a picket line. Not in range country where a drifting horse could mean life or death to a rider.

Someone had turned those horses loose. It was one way to get rid of the guards, at least long enough for a man to sneak out of camp. His mind made up on this score, Galvin came slithering down the hill from his lookout, and was within about a hundred feet of the corral when he saw the silhouette of a man moving off with one of the unsaddled ponies.

Galvin might have captured him then and there, but he was more interested in the missing seventy-five thousand dollars. After watching the movements of the midnight horse thief and deciding in which direction he was headed, Galvin lost no time in getting to Patches.

Then Galvin and his pinto were moving off in the wake of the mysterious renegade. Off to the south, as they made their way north, Galvin could hear the shouts of Hal and his comrade, who finally succeeded in recovering the strayed horses.

The man he was following led his horse until he was more than a mile from the telegraph camp. Then he climbed aboard the animal bareback, and was etched momentarily against the sky. Galvin gave him plenty of head start, but his keen ears still kept the sounds of the padding hoofs within hearing. With all of the brush and grass about, a silent passage was not too easy to effect.

The course of the pair led to the South Platte River, down into its shallows, and across to the north bank.

An hour or more passed.

Galvin finally estimated that they might have travelled as much as fifteen miles from the South Platte; and by glancing at the star clock in the skies, he decided that it was somewhere between two and three o'clock in the morning. No one would expect a pleasant reception in any plains camp at this hour of the night.

Suddenly the horse ahead of him slowed down to a shambling walk. Galvin slid from the back of his own animal, dropped his reins, and moved ahead on moccasined feet.

Sounds of voices came to his ears, and the mutter of conversation. Then the figure of a standing man was etched briefly in the darkness, before it seemed to disappear into a hole in the ground. The mounted man resumed his forward progress. Galvin began to wonder whether he had left his own animal too soon, but then he spotted the red coals of a fire about a quarter of a mile ahead and decided that would be the hunted man's goal.

Galvin's job now was to avoid the guard and get up to that fire himself. He knew that if this was indeed Pelt McGrew's camp, it would not be as simple for him to enter its confines as it had been farther back along the telegraph trail. For one thing, McGrew was playing for bigger stakes now, and he would not be taking too many chances. For another thing, he would know that the telegraph men were not going to suffer a robbery such as the payroll incident without some attempt at retaliation.

Man and horse parted company up ahead, as the rider slid to the ground and appeared to be leading

his animal toward a wrangler who would care for him while the night-prowling renegade was attending to his business. Galvin decided that he no longer had anything to worry about regarding the fellow's destination. His chore now was to get past the guard, inside the confines of the camp and to interrupt the smooth functioning of Pelt McGrew's organization as much as he could.

He also hoped to locate the pouch with the seventy-five thousand dollars, and to regain it for Pierce and his men.

Suddenly a voice said in a husky whisper: "Stand where you are, mister!"

Galvin halted. There was a mild chuckle as the guard said:

"Drop your weapons, Galvin. We've been expecting you. Maybe you'll be sorry you made this a one-man job!"

"One-man job?" Galvin replied calmly. "But it's more than a one-man job. You've let one man from the telegraph camp into your quarters already. Did he have the password, perhaps?"

The guard paused for a moment, apparently amazed at the remark, then insisted:

"Drop your weapons before we have any more palaver!"

Larry took his time about it, but finally could see no way in which to avoid discarding his twin Colts. He unpouched them and dropped them to the ground.

"Now, up with your hands, high!" came the next command.

Galvin complied with this, then awaited the guard's next orders.

"Now place your hands on top of your head, clasp

them together, and start walking toward that dying campfire with slow, easy steps," the guard instructed.

Galvin complied readily enough. When he had gone several paces, the guard halted him, and possessed himself of the guns which the telegraph scout had discarded. Apparently convinced that he now had matters completely his own way, the sentry approached Galvin, thrust the round bore of a gun muzzle in his back and said:

"Boy, will McGrew be glad to see you. We've taken on some reinforcements since the last time we saw you; several of them are Comanche Indians from down south of here. They know a good deal about little refinements of torture that will sure make you jump and scream and wish you were safe on the south side of the river. We'll sure pay you double for that little deal back near Julesburg, yessirrec! Now march."

Galvin could imagine just how glad McGrew would be to see him, but he had no intention of being marched into the buffalo hunters' camp as a prisoner.

As Larry shuffled along, the guard moved up behind him and held the muzzle of his gun in the scout's back. When they had gone about fifty yards from the spot where he had been intercepted, Galvin stumbled. One foot went back of him as though he were fighting to regain his balance. It struck between the guard's legs and the fellow tumbled over Galvin's back and sprawled out on the ground. Moving with the quickness of one of the mountain cats he had hunted for several years, Galvin recovered his balance, dived on to the figure of the guard, and closed his fingers about the trigger of the weapon he held, so that it would not be discharged into the night.

Losing possession of his gun, the guard tried to cry out a warning, but Calvin was prepared for that, too. His left fist came up in a short arc, landing on the man's chin with a *splattering* sound, and the fellow went limp.

Calvin was panting from his exertions. As the guard relaxed, the telegraph man came up on his knees, took several deep breaths, and then permitted himself to relax until his pounding heart and beating lungs settled back to normal.

A careful examination of the man indicated that he was going to be out for a long time. But Calvin could take no chances. He worked at the job of binding up the sentry, even as his mind was weighing and discarding plans for immediate action. He gagged the luckless fellow, bound his hands and feet, and then rolled him into a thicket where he would not be found too readily. When this part of the job was done, Calvin recovered his own guns and the one that the guard had discarded, and again moved off in the direction of the camp.

Naturally he was much more cautious now, although he did not think that McGrew would be likely to have additional men on guard on this side of the camp.

As the scout surveyed the camp, he could see that the fire which had first attracted his attention was burning before a buffalo hide tent. Apparently this was the only structure in the camp area. Bundles of blankets in an irregular line-up beyond the tent indicated the spots where the other members of the band were sleeping.

There was some sort of a light in the tent, and Calvin decided it was probably a coal oil lamp. It was obvious that the renegade from the telegraph

camp had gone inside the tent to discuss his business with Pelt McGrew and some of his henchmen.

Slithering forward slowly, Galvin again spotted each one of the men sleeping in the camp, and then discovered that there was a drowsing guard seated on a saddle at the entrance to McGrew's tent. The fellow held a rifle across his lap, and was nodding sleepily.

Galvin chuckled in spite of himself, then surveyed the area around the tent to determine whether another guard had been posted in the rear. None was visible.

He made certain that his guns were safely belted about his middle, then took out the long skinning knife that was so important a part of his equipment. As he ran his thumb along it, to test it for keenness, the glint of starlight gleamed upon the metal.

The scout moved noiselessly to the rear of the tent, crouched there and listened. The gruff, rasping voice of Pelt McGrew came to him. Galvin caught the words:

"Then you think it might be a good idea if we waited for the second shipment, eh?"

Galvin was alert for the reply of the other man, and suddenly it came, briskly, and with a harsh chuckle.

"One hundred fifty thousand dollars is always better than seventy-five thousand, isn't it? Besides, it'll mean a lot more than that in sabotaging the line."

The speaker was Harry Burton!

CHAPTER TEN

THE conversation going on inside the tent convinced Galvin of two things. One was that Pelt McGrew had not told his men the full details of his activities, nor did they know all that is going on between him and Harry Burton. Burton's remark concerning the money immediately brought a reaction from McGrew, who said:

"We'll split up the dinero right here and now. You'll want to be getting back to the telegraph camp before daylight. Apparently Galvin is suspicious about your doings."

"I'm sure he is," Burton agreed. Then he laughed again and remarked: "Maybe I overplayed the business with the girl. Her father is well off, though, and marriage to her would have its advantages. But it begins to look as though she is really wrapped up in that engineer."

Now it was Pelt McGrew's turn to laugh. He lowered his voice a bit so that it would not penetrate beyond the walls of the tent, but even so Galvin could hear the buffalo hunter, and he began to shiver at the evil in the man's voice.

"There's one way to fix it so that engineer won't be any more trouble to you," McGrew said archly. "I almost thought I had the job done once before."

"No more of that," Burton insisted. "I don't want anything to happen to Fred Pierce. He's a good en-

gineer for my money, but he's a weak sister when it comes to bucking the frontier, and if we do away with him, they're likely to come up with another hombre who is plenty rough and ready. Someone who'll spend his time tracking down folks like us, and making certain that we're six feet under with our toes turned up."

McGrew weighed this thought. "Maybe you're right, Burton."

"I know I'm right," Burton insisted. "Larry Galvin is the big man in that camp, and if Pierce didn't have him around, he'd still be digging post holes back in Nebraska."

McGrew was silent for some moments. Burton was fumbling around in one corner of the tent, and Galvin guessed that he was trying to locate the money pouch. Finally McGrew asked:

"How much would it be worth to you to get rid of Larry Galvin?"

Now that the discussion had come around to him personally, the scout naturally stiffened. He realized that the time for action had arrived. He took a firm grip on the bone handle of his skinning knife, slapped the sharp point through the tanned leather of the buffalo hide nearest him, then slashed down. There was a faint screaming noise as the hide parted before him.

Obviously the sound had been heard within the tent, but neither one of the two men immediately identified it for what it was. Before they realized its significance, Galvin was standing behind them, erect, and with a pistol in his left hand and the gleaming knife in his right fist. He said softly:

"Good evening, gentlemen. A cosy little party, isn't it? Burton, I'm surprised to see you here in such

bad company. Susan Dillard wouldn't like this at all."

Burton started to rise from his sitting position, but Galvin knew that he held the advantage as long as the men were squatted before him.

"Stay right where you are," he ordered. Then he was sidling around the tent, avoiding the little odds and ends which were hanging from the tent poles and braces, until he was almost at the front opening. Now he was facing the men, and the lantern which hung from a nail stuck in the centre pole was lighting up their surprised faces.

Pelt McGrew's bearded face twisted into a leer, and he asked grimly:

"How long do you think you're going to get away with this, Galvin?" Then he raised his voice and called: "Callahan!"

There was a rustle outside the tepee, and Galvin knew that the drowsing guard was finally coming to life in response to his master's voice. Galvin was prepared for this, however, and as the fellow thrust his head through the tepee opening, Galvin slapped him over the skull with the barrel of his gun.

Callahan fell forward on his face, and his cold fingers released their grip on the rifle. The scout whirled back to face McGrew and his guest, and said grimly:

"Next time you let a peep out, I'll gun-whip you, McGrew. I'm interested in the details of your little offer to Burton to get rid of Larry Galvin. How much do *you* think it would be worth?"

Pelt McGrew snarled. He was about to raise his voice again when Galvin concluded:

"You might be able to rouse your boys outside, McGrew! But I've got a hunch that I could trigger

twice and salivate both of you before any of them could get here. Five will get you ten, too, that the first couple would stub their toes on Callahan here when they came through the doorway."

McGrew was weighing his chances, and it was obvious that he did not think too much of them. He looked sideways at Harry Burton, but the eastern business man apparently had no suggestions to offer. He was not a gunman himself, and saw only death and danger in the waving barrel of the gun Galvin was holding.

Galvin was back across the tepee, then, and removing the pistols from the holsters at the hips of the two seated men. Then he looked about and spotted the payroll satchel which bore the stencilled legend in black letters: OVERLAND TELEGRAPH COMPANY ST. LOUIS MISSOURI.

Motioning toward the bag, Galvin said:

"McGrew, dump that out, and let's see the colour of the dinero."

The buffalo hunter leaned forward, caught one of the handles of the satchel and tipped it up. Rolls of gold coins and packets of bills rolled in a heap before him. Galvin nodded in satisfaction, then ordered:

"Stow it again, and tie up the bag. I'll be getting out of here in a big hurry, and I don't want to spill any of it." •

McGrew hesitated, so Galvin wiggled his pistol menacingly. Little white ridges showed on his knuckles as he tightened his grip on the trigger, then announced:

"I'm not taking any chances with you, Pelt. I'd just as leave take this off your dead body. Now hop to it."

Pelt McGrew's clawed hands scrabbled in the

money like a puppy dog digging at a fox hole, and finally the currency was back in its container. Galvin bent over, picked it up and slung it over his arm. When this was done, he turned to Burton and said:

"I can't figure you, Burton. I never had any idea that you'd be hooked up with a hombre like McGrew here. His hands are covered with blood."

Harry Burton straightened up. A curious smile crossed his features as he replied calmly:

"There's nothing wrong with what I'm doing, Galvin. You're just not looking at it the right way."

"I don't think I quite understand you," Galvin replied briskly. "But I don't think this is either the time or the place to argue it out."

"Maybe not," Burton conceded. "But I can tell you that I've been backing Pelt McGrew simply because I had a hunch he was the toughest hombre in this neck of the woods. Now I'm convinced that you're the boy who deserves that label. Maybe we could talk business, Galvin. I can assure you that it will be worth a heap more than the telegraph company will ever pay you."

Galvin bristled. But he sensed, too, that Burton might be deliberately trying to get him off guard so that the McGrew gang could turn the tables. Callahan was beginning to stir in the doorway, and Galvin could not turn his attention from the two ringleaders to cold-cock the guard again. He would have to finish his business here quickly, and be on his way. His roving eyes located a lariat hanging on the ridge pole behind the lantern. Galvin secured it, and was soon busy tying Burton and McGrew back to back. When this portion of the trussing operation was com-

pleted, he cut off smaller lengths of the rope and bound their hands before them, so there would be no temptation to meddle with the main knots.

All of the time that this operation was going on, Burton was talking to Galvin, and trying to impress him with the possibilities ahead for anyone who threw in with him.

"Like you say, Burton," Galvin finally conceded, "maybe your deal is a better one than the one I have now. But I'm finishing this deal before I go into anything new. You might see me later on. Good luck, and good hunting."

As he said this last, Galvin thrust a gag into the mouth of each man, bound it with his neckerchief then turned to the lantern, lifted the chimney and blew out the flame.

Working deftly in the darkness, he now tied up Callahan, gagged him too, then gathered up the currency bag and made his retreat through the slit in the rear of the buffalo-skin tepee.

Outside, the night sky was still clear and crisp. The stars were blinking down upon the encampment. The sickle moon had climbed up a bit in the arch of heaven.

Like some grim shadow, Galvin moved off into the darkness. He found the spot where he had overcome the outside guard and tied him up. The fellow was still reposing blissfully in the thicket where Galvin had placed him. The scout loosened the gag so that the man would not smother. His face was swollen, and his cheeks were pressed against the under side of the cloth.

Then Galvin located his pinto pony. The alert Patches looked up at him as though to ask something about his adventures in the outlaw camp. Galvin

brushed the horse's muzzle with the fingers of his left hand, then remarked:

"We're going home, Patches. And we're carrying the dinero with us. Fred Pierce will be delighted to hear about this night's work."

Then he fastened the satchel to the tie-strings on the front of the saddle, kicked his moccasined feet into the stirrups, swung up into the saddle and started southward toward the river at a jog trot.

When he was a good hour's ride from the renegade camp, Galvin's quick ears picked up the sounds of pursuit. It was not until then that he brushed his heels against Patches sides, and whispered into the horse's ear :

"They're coming, Patches boy. Let's hit for the river."

The horse picked up its gait and moved along at a fast trot, keeping plenty of open space between them and their pursuers. Galvin was riding low in his saddle, partly to screen himself from the cool prairie wind, and partly to keep the sack of currency from being banged against the horse's shoulders.

When the beating hoofs of McGrew and his men continued to close in on them, Galvin turned to look over his shoulder, and became aware that the leaders of the buffalo hunters were shooting toward him with their rifles.

Seeking some sort of shelter that would form a bulwark, if he found it necessary to make a stand, Galvin finally spotted a bluff which cast deep shadows down along the river trail. He swerved Patches in that direction and brought the quivering horse to a sliding halt.

The telegraph scout swung down from his saddle, held one hand over the horse's muzzle to quiet him,

and then relaxed against the smooth wall of rock. McGrew and his men came pounding on, moved right by Galvin's shelter and continued toward the river.

When they were gone, Galvin chuckled, then whispered confidentially to the horse:

"That's the advantage of riding alone, Patches boy. When you hear the sounds of other hoofs, you know it's trouble behind you. But Pelt McGrew can't tell whether we're still ahead of him or not. He's constantly hearing the pounding of his own men's horses. I reckon we're rid of them for this trip. They'll probably high-tail it all the way to the river, and when they don't catch up with us, they'll give it up as a bad job."

From his place of concealment, Galvin had not had much opportunity to study the members of McGrew's party, but he was satisfied that Harry Burton had not been with them. He knew which horse the easterner had been riding, and was certain that it was not in the pursuers' band. A little curiosity about this developed in the mind of the scout.

But at the moment, his own safety and the safety of his horse were paramount. He did not want to be on the trail when McGrew and his men reached the South Platte, decided that their quarry had eluded them, and started back for their camp. It would be wise for him to seek shelter somewhere in the neighbourhood of the bluff that was now shadowing him, and wait there until daylight.

This decision made, Galvin started walking his horse along the base of the rocky upthrust. He finally found a sloping trail which appeared to lead to the top of the bluff. It was covered by shifting talus near the bottom, but when horse and man had covered

about thirty yards, they found a smooth, rocky path. Galvin followed this slowly, and finally came to the crest of the cliff, spotting a number of tree clumps, any one of which would give him the shelter he needed.

Galvin led Patches into one of these thickets, keeping close enough to the edge of the bluff so that he would be able to watch the trail, or at least hear the sounds of any large party of horsemen travelling along it.

He off-saddled the pinto, rubbed him down with a cloth from his saddlebags, then settled down on the ground.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LARRY did not know how long he had been sleeping, but when he was finally aroused by the movement of Patches beside him, he felt rested and refreshed and could see the first glimmerings of dawn. The pinto was pawing beside him, and the air was filled with dust and the noise of hoof beats.●

He first thought that McGrew had located his hideaway, that the riders were all about him. Then he realized that they were merely passing at the foot of the bluff.

Galvin stood up and peered through the trees and over the rim of the bluff. He was interested in the numbers of the McGrew gang, and was not too surprised to learn that there were almost fifty of them.

He waited until even the stragglers had passed by, then turned to Patches and said:

"I reckon it's time for us to be moving on. They'll be wondering what's happened to us, especially if any of the pickets spotted Pelt McGrew and his bully boys when they rode down to the river bank."

Patches was frisky and willing. Galvin geared him, fastened the money bag again, and swung into the saddle. He walked the animal toward the edge of the thicket; while he was still in the shelter of the trees, a rider swept past about a hundred yards toward the east and continued on toward the South Platte River crossing. Galvin watched him go, held Patches'

muzzle to keep him from whinnying a greeting to the other horse, then said:

"Harry Burton! I wonder where he's going at this hour of the morning. I wonder, too, whether he saw McGrew and knows that the buffalo boys were on a wild-goose chase. Let's track him down and find out!"

It was obvious from the speed with which he was riding that Burton had no idea that there might be any pursuit.

Galvin hoped to be able to capitalize on this. He put his heels to Patches, and the willing animal increased his gait, and kept the renegade easterner in view. They were making good time, and soon the sparkling, dawn-lit waters of the South Platte were visible several miles ahead. A ground mist rose to a height of a hundred feet or more, and made all objects look as though they were swathed in strange ghostly mantles.

The scout suddenly felt the horse stagger beneath him. He tried to tighten his grip on the reins, and to hold his seat in the saddle by gripping his thighs against the horse's flanks. But Patches suddenly went down on his nose, and Larry catapulted over his head and struck the ground with blinding force.

The telegraph man fought to retain his senses, conscious of the great responsibilities that were riding with him even as disaster struck. But the battle was a losing one. He sprawled on the long buffalo grass, supine and apparently lifeless. . . .

When Larry regained consciousness, he opened his eyes and looked up at Patches. The pinto gazed down at Galvin in question and surprise. Finally the rider forced a smile to his features, pushed himself up on

his elbows, and then became aware of the throbbing in his temples.

He felt the knob gingerly, and muttered:

"I sure came down like a ton of bricks. It's a wonder I didn't fracture my skull. Feels like a good concussion at least."

As he tried to climb to his feet, after rolling over on his hands and knees, Galvin felt dizzy. Patches kept nudging him, and only succeeded in pushing him flat on his face. There was a pain in his abdomen, and he was trying to decide if he might have also suffered internal injuries. He looked up at the sky, and his eyes saw the sun a quarter of the way toward the zenith.

"Golly," he murmured, "I must have been out for an hour or more. I'm sure overdue at that telegraph camp. They'll be counting me lost for sure."

His next effort to arise was more successful, even though dizziness still plagued him. He braced himself with the saddle horn, then tried to find his left stirrup. As he did, he saw that Patches was favouring his right front leg.

"What's the matter, Patches. old fellow? Did you slam into a badger hole?" Galvin asked.

As he spoke, he bent over, brushed his hand along the tendons of the leg, felt the clotted blood, and found the mark where the lower part of the leg had struck the lip of the badger hole. Galvin spoke soothing words to the loyal animal, and then remarked:

"No more riding you today, Patches, old fellow. We'll both have to hoof it to camp. It'll mean that I'm going to get my feet wet in the South Platte, but I sure don't want anything to happen to you."

Larry Galvin came erect then, gripped the loose reins and gathered them together, then started for-

ward with a plodding gait. Patches followed along behind him. Even though there were only six or seven miles between the spot where Larry and his horse had come to grief and the telegraph camp, this would take the best part of two hours over the rough terrain.

After a little more than an hour and a half, Galvin and his horse came to a high point above the north bank of the South Platte from which they could look across the stream at the telegraph camp on the other side. The men in the camp were moving about their chores. The Southern sympathizers, waiting for their money, were playing cards on the bottom of a big empty water barrel. The tents of the workers, their leaders and their guests were silent and no movement was visible about them.

The cook tent had its flaps open, and its sides rolled up. Breakfast was finished and Cookie Grange and his swampers were taking it easy until eleven o'clock when it would be necessary to assemble something for the workers who were close to the camp. The other men usually took rations along with them.

Galvin was pleased to discover that the pickets were still stationed around the camp. There was a grim war going on, and the more conscious of this fact the telegraph men were, the better it would be for all of them.

The sentries were alert enough to spot Galvin, and several of them who were working along the river converged on the ford and started across to his assistance. Frank Seward was with them, and he came up to Galvin at a fast trot.

He studied the dishevelled figure of the scout, then asked:

"What happened?"

"My horse took a header in a badger hole," Calvin replied blandly.

Seward bit his lip, studied the men about him, and decided that maybe Calvin did not want to talk too much about his night's adventures in the presence of the other men. Finally he asked:

"Did you see any signs of a large group of riders on your side of the river? Some of the guard spotted them about where you were a while ago, just at daybreak this morning."

"You mean Pelt McGrew and his boys?" Calvin asked with a tired smile. "I saw them, all right; I reckon they're long gone by this time."

Seward raised his eyebrows, then retorted gently:

"You and Patches both look plenty beat up. I reckon you'll feel a lot better when you get a little salve on your hurts, and a little breakfast in your stomachs. Let's go."

Galvin explained about the lamed leg on his horse, and the assistant foreman of the telegraph gang immediately helped the scout up on to the back of his own horse. When they reached the shallow ford, Seward halted long enough for Patches to settle himself in the mud, and get a good coating of the thick brown daub on his injured member.

Then the intelligent animal shook himself, and followed along in the wake of his master as they forded the river. With the return of the scout, some of the Southern sympathizers came over out of curiosity, forgetting all about their card game. Others talked among themselves as they sat around the water barrel.

Galvin spoke up: "You can report to Fred Pierce's tent in about half an hour. We'll be paying off then."

The news went through the camp like wildfire. The guards went back to their posts while Seward and Galvin, leading Patches, continued their journey through the camp toward where Galvin's soogans were rolled. Patches would be picketed there until strength was restored to his injured leg.

Galvin swung down from behind Seward, took the gear off his own horse, and placed it on a wooden horse which now held some of his other fixings. Seward said:

"I'll tell the boss you're back, and with good news. I'm sure he'll be glad to hear about it. See you later."

"In about half an hour," Galvin said again.

Well within the half-hour he had allotted himself, he was washed, dressed in a clean shirt, had changed his moccasins for his polished riding boots, and was moving toward the engineer's tent with the payroll satchel over his arm.

There was a line of men before Pierce's tent, and the telegraph company clerk was seated at a folding camp table with his payroll records in front of him. Fred Pierce had not put in an appearance as yet. Frank Seward wasn't taking any chances. He was hovering about the edge of the area with a rifle crooked in his arm. Four of his most trusted men were also posted in strategic locations where they could observe anyone coming into the camp through the picket lines, and could see all that went on at the engineer's tent.

Galvin nodded to the clerk, said:

"I'll be with you in a minute," then went on into Pierce's tent. The wounded engineer was propped up on his cot, and the bandaged hip and shoulder were resting comfortably on a nest of pillows. Larry greeted him pleasantly, saying:

"I managed to bring back the payroll money. It was a lively session; I'll tell you all about it when we've taken care of the men. Keno?"

"That's first rate, Larry," Pierce said seriously. "I knew I could depend on you. I'm pretty well worn out by this whole mess, and I'd like to rest while you're paying off. I can't stand to look into the eyes of some of those fellows who are leaving us. This Civil War business is cutting me deeply. I know just how they feel, and I'm not condemning any of them. But I can't make myself shake hands with them and wish them luck. I guess you know how I feel."

"I think I do," Galvin replied.

He opened the canvas bag which contained the money and began rolling out the currency on the bed. As he did so, he asked:

"How much does the payroll amount to?"

"About thirty thousand, I'd say," Pierce replied. "It won't be all going out this morning, though, because we're responsible for the surveyors and for the men who are out pole-setting and wire-stringing. I'd say ten or fifteen thousand would take care of the men here in camp."

Galvin counted out this amount, put it into his hat, then closed and locked the currency container, and placed it in the chest at the foot of Pierce's bed. When this was done, he waved a good-bye to the engineer and walked out of the tent. He took a seat on the opposite side of the table from the clerk and methodically began stacking the money into piles according to denominations.

Then he announced:

"The clerk will call your name and tell you how much you have coming to you. It'll be on a duplicate slip which he will give to you. I'll take the slip, and

disburse the currency. If anyone doesn't agree with the amount read off by the clerk, don't hold up the line. Step aside for the time being, and we'll give you every opportunity to check the individual statements. All right, let's go."

The clerk read off the first name, one of the telegraph men stepped forward and accepted the slip. Galvin counted out the money, passed it to the man, took the slip and stamped it, after the worker had signed it as a receipt.

The operation took about three quarters of an hour, and when it was over, Galvin was a bit surprised to discover that he had disbursed only about two-thirds of the amount Pierce had estimated. He looked up to see Seward at the end of the line, and remarked:

"Are you leaving, too, Frank?"

"Not so's you could notice it," Seward replied. "I'm perfectly happy here. And it looks as though you've made a lot of the boys happy, too."

"Not as many as I figured I would," Galvin said in some surprise. "I could have sworn this line was longer than it was."

"It was longer, when you started," Seward told him. "Some of the men were sceptical about getting their money. But when they saw that it was all here, and in cold cash, that was good enough for them. They're willing to let the company hold it for them. They're back on the job."

Galvin and Seward talked about several other matters; then the sounds of hoof beats turned their attention to a group of riders who were walking their horses from the direction of the picket lines. Galvin left the table, came out to the trail and looked up at the Southern sympathizers who were riding out.

He waved to them briskly and said:

"It's been nice working with you fellows. Give my regards to Jefferson Davis!"

Some of the men, who had apparently been doubtful about the way in which their departure would be taken, smiled and waved in reply. Then they began singing "Dixie" as they moved off along the trail toward Denver.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LATER that day, after Galvin's strength had been restored by a nap and a good meal, he put on his hat and headed for Pierce's tent. The pay table was set up in front of the tent again; and Frank Seward was filling in as paymaster. The clerk droned off the names, handed out the duplicate statements of account, and discussed matters with the men who questioned their accounts.

Seward looked up as Galvin walked into the circle of light from the coal oil lantern, then asked calmly:

"Feel better now, Galvin?"

"A heap better," Galvin told him. "I reckon I could wrestle my weight in buffalo about now. How's it going? Want me to fill in for you?"

"It's going fine," Seward assured him. "We're almost through. Take a rest for yourself. Or drop in on the boss and cheer him up. His chin is dragging on the ground."

Galvin nodded his agreement, moved around behind the table, lifted the tent flap and went in. Pierce was up in a canvas chair which had been rigged up for him, and he looked up as the scout came in. There was another lantern hanging from the centre pole of the tent, and it sent flickering shadows to all parts of the interior.

"Seward and the clerk are finishing the payroll," Galvin said. "What are you going to do with the rest of the money?"

"It'll have to go through to Denver, to be placed on deposit there for the account of the company," Pierce said dully.

Galvin could not understand his attitude, but did remark:

"It's fortunate that I was able to get it back for you in time. The men all act as though this is about the greatest thing that's happened to them since we left Ogallala. The Southerners are all on their way, and we'll have this whole outfit welded back into a smooth-working team before you know it."

Pierce glared at Galvin and said bitterly:

"Too bad it *didn't* get here in time!"

Galvin's mouth dropped open.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard about Susan?" Pierce almost shouted. "Don't you know she's left?"

"Where has she gone?" Galvin inquired.

"She's on her way to Denver," Pierce explained. "Her father and I talked things over last night. He has several important friends who are big stockholders in the telegraph company. He offered to drive on into Denver and contact some of his friends there who could underwrite an amount like seventy-five thousand dollars and get the telegraph company out of its difficulties. I had no idea you were going to make a one-man foray against Pelt McGrew; nor did I know whether you would be successful if you did. We agreed that if you hadn't returned by daylight with the money, the Dillards would go to Denver and get it for me. I didn't like the idea, but I was backed up into a corner. There was nothing else I could do."

Galvin studied the engineer.

"I still don't see how that's any indication that you've lost out with the girl," he said. "It seems to

me that if she is willing to encourage her father to go into debt for you to the extent of seventy-five thousand dollars, she must believe that you will make good on this job."

"That's one way of looking at it," Pierce admitted. "But when Burton went with them, then I knew that I was being made a fool of."

"Burton?" Galvin's mouth dropped open as he repeated the name. Then a great light dawned on him. He looked at Pierce with shocked surprise, then asked:

"How did Burton get in on the deal?"

Fred Pierce hesitated for some time, then began briskly:

"Harry Burton came riding into camp just before daybreak. He was rather dishevelled-looking and informed us that he had been out with you, trying to locate Pelt McGrew and recover the missing money. He insisted that you had actually located the camp of the crooks, but that in the fight which followed, you had been sorely wounded or killed. He had to flee for his own life, and came back to us with the tragic tale of your failure. It was this which finally convinced Susan that the money must be gotten in Denver."

"That's a quaint story, isn't it?" Galvin said grimly. Pierce's eyes popped open and he asked:

"Didn't it happen that way?"

"Not quite," Galvin replied. "I had no idea in the world where to search for Pelt McGrew and his men, but apparently Harry Burton knew right where they could be located all the time. He played a trick on the horse guards during the night, and managed to get out of the camp area, across the river, and was heading northward when I picked up his trail. When we finally reached the guard line thrown about McGrew's camp, Burton was greeted with open arms. I

had to bind and gag the guard in order to get close enough to McGrew's tent to hear and see what was going on. Burton and McGrew were working hand-in-glove."

"Burton?" Pierce repeated as though he could not believe his ears. "I can't believe it! Why would he want to do that? Burton is a responsible business man. He has all kinds of money. Seventy-five thousand dollars would be like a drop in the bucket for him."

"Maybe not exactly a drop in the bucket," Galvin remarked, shaking his head slowly. "I'd say that it was just a good-sized down payment. Now that he appears to have worked his way into Mr. Dillard's confidence, I'd say that he was looking forward to making another hundred and fifty thousand dollars without too much trouble."

"One hundred fifty thousand dollars?" Fred Pierce demanded in shocked tones. "Where is he going to find that kind of money laying around?"

"Right along the telegraph trail," Galvin reminded him "You've asked your superiors in St. Louis and Kansas City to send along another seventy-five thousand dollars to replace the stolen money. Unless I miss my guess, you forgot to cancel that; and Pelt McGrew and his men will be camping along that trail, expecting to pick up the new shipment almost as easily as they grabbed off the last one. And they might succeed at that!"

Galvin paused for breath, and as he did, Fred Pierce suddenly shook himself out of the doldrums that had been gripping him all day. He reached over to a small table where his telegraph sounder was in its case, hooked it into the line that came down through the centre of his tent, and immediately began batting out a determined message.

The pick-up was made at Fort Morgan, and then an acknowledgment came through. Galvin recognized the firm, steady hand of the operator at the other end, read the message without too much difficulty, and knew that he was congratulating Fred Pierce on the recovery of the money.

As soon as the telegraph key was silent, Pierce turned around to Galvin and said:

"Well, I reckon that for once I've been able to put a spike in Pelt McGrew's wheel. I'm beginning to feel better already."

"Glad to hear it," Galvin assured him. "But what are we going to do about Harry Burton and the Dillards? What are Susan's plans with Burton?"

"I've been figuring she was going to marry him," Pierce declared promptly. "But whether she loves him or not, I'm going to make dead certain she doesn't marry any conniving killer!"

"He's too tricky to be a killer," Galvin pointed out. "He lets other men like Pelt McGrew do his killing for him, just so long as he is able to pay for the job with yellow gold."

"A man like that is just as much of a killer as the fellow who pulls the trigger, in my book" Pierce insisted.

"Maybe you're right," Galvin agreed. "But there's only one thing to do, and that's for me to head for Denver and catch Burton cold before Dillard has a chance to draw the money."

Fred Pierce studied the scout.

"Good luck to you, Galvin. I'll be rooting for you all the way."

Galvin sent him a flipped salute and moved out of the tent into the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LARRY GALVIN headed straight for the picket line. Much as he would have liked to make this trip aboard his Patches horse, he realized that the animal had not had enough rest to permit his injured leg to get back into shape. Straining it now might mean that Patches would cripple himself completely, and would have to be destroyed. Galvin had too much affection for his horse to contemplate anything like that.

While he was working at the picket line, gathering up his gear and roping a long-legged sorrel, Frank Seward approached him. He studied Galvin for some moments, then asked:

"Mind telling me where you're going?"

"I'm heading west for Denver," Galvin replied. "I've got to catch up with the Dillards and tell him that we don't need his dinero. Susan will probably want to get a message I have from Fred Pierce."

Suddenly Frank Seward raised his hand. Galvin stopped talking, and heard the sound which had arrested Seward's attention.

"Riders coming in from the East," the scout said, "and it sounds as though there are plenty of them. Seward, you'd better rouse everyone and tell them to come out with loaded rifles. This is likely to be a real knock-down and drag-out. But who it can be this time is more than I can figure. I'll go tell Pierce."

Seward ran rapidly around the picket lines alert-

ing his guards. Many of them had already picked up the sounds of the galloping hoofs. Galvin hastened to Pierce's tent and announced:

"It sounds as though we're going to have company, and plenty of it. There is a big mounted party coming in this direction from the east."

Fred Pierce listened for the sounds, then replied promptly:

"Help me up, and give me a hand outside. It sounds as though every rifle in this camp is going to be needed. I can pull a trigger with the best of them; and with as many horses as they've got, I'm bound to hit something sooner or later."

Galvin gave Pierce a hand, and they were passing through the tent flap and heading for the reclining chair alongside the tepee when suddenly the night air was broken by the brassy sounds of a bugle.

Fred Pierce released his grip on Galvin's arm, settled into the chair and sighed with relief.

"False alarm, I reckon," he declared.

"I'm not too sure of that," Galvin said grimly. "It may be some sort of a trick. We're not going to relax or let down our defences until we see the mark of their colours, and the cut of their uniforms."

A few moments later, however, it was obvious that the precautions were not going to be needed, at least not for the moment. The first squad of the cavalry unit came into the camp at a fast walk. Frank Seward was running along at the head of the guidon man's horse, and leading him toward the tent where Pierce and Galvin were now standing.

The two coal oil lanterns, one inside the tent, and the other one on the pole before the flap, lighted up the immediate area. As the guidon man took position, the commanding officer of the troop wheeled

in and saluted Fred Pierce crisply. Then he said:

"I'm Lieutenant Fred Carlton, U.S. Dragoons, at your service, sir. I've been despatched here by the commanding officer at Fort Morgan to act as military escort for this telegraph construction crew. The War Department in Washington has sent along top secret orders indicating that this operation is one of the most important in which we are engaged. Upon its success or failure may depend whether or not we keep California in the Union. My first assignment will be to attempt to round up the renegades who killed your paymaster and stole your payroll. Have you any instructions that might help?"

Both Galvin and Pierce smiled. The young engineer studied the lieutenant and said:

"Your name is Fred, and my name is Fred. That makes us cousins under the skin. I'm sure we're going to be able to work together because of it. But as for the matter of the stolen payroll, that has already been satisfactorily handled, at least insofar as the money is concerned."

Obviously the young dragoon lieutenant was amazed at this pronouncement. Fred Pierce explained:

"The telegraph is a valuable source of communication, but only when its facilities can be used. Obviously, you and your troop must have left Fort Morgan before my message announcing the recovery of the money by Mr. Galvin was relayed through your headquarters."

"It is of no immediate importance," Lieutenant Carlton declared with a shrug of his shoulders. "It means that we can set ourselves about a much more important task."

"What is that?" Pierce inquired immediately.

The lieutenant drew himself up pompously, and announced: "We have been advised of the presence in this vicinity of a Confederate raider force, one of whose duties will be the destruction of this telegraph line and the decimation of its workers. You will agree, I'm sure, that the safety of your men and the success of the telegraph line is much more important than mere money."

At the mention of the Confederate raider force in the Colorado Territory, one question immediately came to the mind of Larry Galvin, and he asked:

"How would such a force come into being out here in this wild country? Where would they be able to secure their recruits?"

Lieutenant Carlton looked at the scout as though the answer to that question was so obvious that it never should have been asked. Then he replied:

"Haven't you had any desertions from your telegraph crew?"

"Desertions?" Fred Pierce asked in some amazement. "I wouldn't say so. As a matter of fact, when Larry here came back with the stolen money this morning, some of the men who were planning to desert us because they wanted their pay decided to stick with us."

"And no one left this camp at all?" persisted the lieutenant.

"Oh, yes," Pierce agreed promptly. "There were about twenty men who were sympathetic to the cause of the South. When the news of Fort Sumter came through on the telegraph and by Pony Express, we gave them the option of remaining with us to finish the line, or following their consciences. It was the only thing we could do."

Lieutenant Carlton waved a hand in an all-inclusive gesture, then said:

"There's your nucleus for the raider force. They'll collect dozens more sympathizers from here to Denver. Jefferson Davis will constitute them an official part of the Confederate Army, and they'll begin to earn their salt. I understand that the same thing is happening in many other parts of the West."

When Carlton halted for breath, the scout remarked: "I'm sure you're wrong about our men. We only did for them what the officers at West Point did for the cadets; what Abraham Lincoln did for Robert E. Lee. I think we can give you more authentic information about the make-up of this raider force, from our own experience."

It became obvious now that Lieutenant Carlton had been casting about in the dark, trying in his own mind to identify the combat forces he was going to fight. He swung down from his horse, moved forward toward Pierce and Galvin, and asked easily:

"What do you know about it?"

"Long before news of Fort Sumter came through to us," Galvin explained, "we began having trouble with an old renegade Mountain Man named Pelt McGrew, and a motley crew which he has gathered around himself. They raided our camp and burned it back near Julesburg. We retaliated, stole some of their buffalo robes to use as tepee material, and felt that they were finished for the time being. It was this same outfit which attacked and killed our paymaster and shot up his escort. A person working on that kind of a deal needs information, and accurate information. I decided that such information could only come from within our own camp. It was by following this hunch that I was able to locate the blackleg, and

followed him to a rendezvous with the raiders. I held these two men at bay, and recovered the payroll money."

Lieutenant Fred Carlton and his men were extremely interested in this narrative. The lieutenant asked for more details and Galvin supplied them. Then he asked:

"Why didn't you kill these men, or bring them back as prisoners?"

Galvin was taken aback. Fred Pierce looked up at Carlton and inquired:

"Are you serious? Galvin has already told you that he was alone in a camp of fifty or sixty desperate armed men. How could he expect to do anything like that?"

A harsh smile crossed the lieutenant's features, and he said:

"Some mention was made of a good sharp knife which was used to slit the rear of the tent. I would have used the same knife on the gullets of these two traitors. It might have saved us a good deal of trouble later on."

Larry looked into the lieutenant's eyes and remarked calmly:

"Maybe that's the way a soldier is trained in wartime, Lieutenant. But I wouldn't be able to kill any man in cold blood, particularly when he had submitted to me and was giving up everything I asked of him."

Carlton realized that this debate was merely slowing things up, so he changed his tactics abruptly and inquired:

"What does this Burton fellow look like? Give me as many details regarding him as you can remember. I'll send one of my dragoons into Denver to contact the authorities there."

Galvin shook his head slowly. "We'll give you his description all right, Lieutenant. But there'll be no need for sending any messenger into Denver. I'm heading that way as soon as we're through with you here. And I can promise you that I'll catch up with Harry Burton. Then it'll be a pleasure for me to turn him over to you, and to a firing squad if that is what the circumstances demand."

Pierce and Galvin took turns describing the eastern business man. Frank Seward and some of the other telegraph workers also supplied little details.

The dragoon lieutenant was restless as the narration continued, and when it was completed he turned to his sergeant-major and said:

"Sergeant-major, do you have those descriptions that were handed to us by our intelligence officers just before we were preparing to leave Fort Morgan?"

The sergeant-major saluted briskly, opened the flap of his despatch case and took out a clip-board. There were a number of papers fastened to this, and some brown and black daguerreotype pictures were attached to them. The non-com passed these to his superior officer.

Lieutenant Carlton leafed through them, turned so that the light of the outside lantern would fall upon them more clearly, then whistled in triumph as he said:

"You've been working with the cream of the crop, and there's no mistake about that."

As he spoke, he held his thumb on the indicated place, and passed the clip-board along to Fred Pierce. Pierce read Burton's dossier aloud:

"HARRY W. BURTON, cotton broker and steamship executive, Natchez, Mississippi; also has extensive interests in New Orleans, in Cuba, and in foreign

markets. Active in fighting the Dred Scott Decision relative to escaped slaves in 1850. Leader of a crusade in the Mississippi Valley which lifted him to a position close to the Governor of his State, and put him in line for that position himself. Latest information indicates that he has been designated as one of the leaders responsible for bringing California, Oregon and Washington into the Confederacy, and for siphoning the products of the Western goldfields into the Confederate treasury at Montgomery, Alabama. Clever, resourceful and aggressive. Wide acquaintance among business men in the North and South. Some reputation as a duellist. Armed and alert at all times. An excellent organizer."

Galvin and Seward nodded.

"Sounds like our man, all right," Galvin concluded.

"He's our rooster, sure enough," Lieutenant Carlton said with a laugh. "I'd appreciate a chance to notify Fort Morgan of this. They may want to pass it along to the higher echelons."

Fred Pierce promptly agreed, and led the lieutenant and his signal non-com into his tent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BOTH telegraph men looked up as the dragoon commander and the young engineer came back to the group. Carlton was holding his gauntlets in his hands and slapping them against the palms as though he were not altogether satisfied with the orders he had received. Finally he turned to Galvin and said:

"I've been in touch with the major at Fort Morgan. He has authorized me to send you to Denver. He has a record of your experience with the Army in a scouting capacity, and is convinced that you will use all discretion in this matter. He feels that it is incumbent upon me to remain with the construction crews here along the telegraph line to see that McGrew and his men do not make any more forays. I am having my clerk write out the necessary papers for you to show our representatives in Denver."

"Very good, sir," Larry replied. He saluted briskly. I'll have my horse rigged and ready to go by the time the papers are written out. As a matter of fact, I was in the midst of my preparations when your detail arrived in camp."

"Carry on," said the lieutenant, returning the salute crisply. Galvin moved off in the direction of the picket line behind the mess tent. Cookie Grange was there, with food he had prepared for the trip.

"Where do you go from here?" Grange asked.

"Denver," replied Galvin, "I hope I'm in time to do something about it. It looks as though

this hombre Burton is a big auger from way back."

"You'll do something about it," Grange assured him, "and it'll be the right thing." He passed the reins to Galvin, and walked along behind him as the scout returned to Pierce's tent.

There the sergeant-major was issuing his orders for the men to bed down for the night.

"We'll be splitting up in the morning," he explained. "One troop will go out with the pole-setters. Another will work with the surveyors, and the rest of the unit will look after the camp, and picket the supply route between here and Fort Morgan."

The soldiers were grateful for this respite, and immediately went about their business.

Lieutenant Carlton and Fred Pierce came toward Galvin as he strode up. The dragoon officer handed him a packet of papers, told him where he would be able to reach the Union intelligence officers in Denver, and then offered him his hand.

Galvin took it. Carlton said:

"This may be a cake-walk, Galvin; and then again it may be an extremely dangerous mission. In these mixed-up times, until we're able to tell where a man's loyalties lie, it's like walking on quicksand. But I'm sure we'll be proud of you and your accomplishments. Good luck to you."

Fred Pierce added his good wishes to those of the officer. Then Galvin swung aboard his horse, pulled his hat down over his forehead, and cantered off into the darkness.

Larry Galvin followed the route throughout the night, and just before daylight he moved off the trail and into a thicket to rest himself and his horse and eat some food from the pack Grange had made up for him.

His analysis of the situation convinced him that Burton and his party could not possibly have reached the growing mining metropolis at the junction of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River until late the previous night, or maybe even this morning, if they had put up at one of the trading posts along the way.

As he approached the Brighton post, the scout noticed signs of activity about, horses at the hitch rack, and others in the corral at the rear of the building. Since he had not been through here since early the preceding year, and knew little about Jack Brighton's politics, he did not know whether he was likely to be a Confederate sympathizer or a Lincoln man.

"Probably playing neutral on the surface," Galvin confided to his horse. "It would be the best for business."

Galvin did not intend to wait too long at the post. It was a bit early in the day for drinking. But there was no better source of information than a spot like this. The scout turned his horse into the hitch rail at the end nearest to the Denver trail, loosened his cinches, and then strode into the building.

The main structure of the post was a sprawling log building that had two wings, and an extension which was used as a kitchen all year around, and also provided two lean-to protective areas on either side of it in blustery weather.

Jack Brighton was behind the bar when Galvin came in. He looked up as the door slammed behind the telegraph man, and greeted him pleasantly. As he made a swipe at the bar, he said:

"You mean to tell me them pole-sitters of yours are following along behind you? I'll have to order

up a dozen more hogsheads of finest whiskey."

"Nothing like that," Galvin assured him. "It'll be a while before they hit Brighton's. I'm making a lone wolf sashay, right now."

Galvin looked around the room and studied the men who were having their breakfast at the half-dozen tables Brighton provided. A trio was also standing at the trading counter, talking animatedly to the capable and buxom Mrs. Brighton.

The scout ordered a hot cup of coffee and some of Mrs. Brighton's famous home-made dried apple pie, and settled himself on a stool at one end of the bar. Jack Brighton brought the order, and then settled down for some conversation. In a half-whisper he said:

"If you've left those shovel swingers you've been nursing, it must be something mighty important. Can I help you with it?"

"I don't know for sure," Galvin declared. He studied the middle-aged old-timer who had known Jim Bridger and Brigham Young and many of the other pioneers who had opened up Utah and Montana and Wyoming. "You might say I'm playing Cupid on this trip!"

"Cupid?" Brighton straightened up. "Not Larry Galvin. How come?"

Galvin smiled, then shrugged and explained:

"It's Fred Pierce, the young engineer on the telegraph line. He's bucking all the odds to make a hit with a beauty from St. Louis. Susan Dillard's her name. She came out to visit with him along the line, and yesterday morning she left in a huff. I've got to catch up with her and tell her she's making a big mistake."

A broad smile crossed Brighton's face, and he remarked:

"Having had a chance to study Susan Dillard for a while last night, I'd say that I know exactly how Fred feels."

The remark was just what Galvin had been hoping to hear, but he did not permit his excitement to betray itself. He sipped at the coffee on his cup, nibbled on a forkful of the apple pie, and surveyed the room about him. At one of the tables in the far corner of the room he spotted a couple of men talking. One of them had been looking in his direction, but turned his head as soon as Galvin looked up.

Some sixth sense warned the telegraph scout that there might be danger lurking there. Another glance, however, reassured Galvin that the men were complete strangers to him. This in itself did not mean that they were not enemies. There was nothing particularly outstanding about either one of them, except maybe the one who had some sort of a dirty bandage on the back of his head, high up on the skull. His crumpled felt hat almost concealed it completely.

"Tell me more about Susan Dillard," Galvin suggested, to keep the conversation on the main track.

Jack Brighton shrugged then remarked:

"Maybe I'd better let you talk to Sarah Jane. Most of it was woman stuff."

Sarah Jane Brighton came out of the kitchen at a call from her husband. She knew Larry Galvin and greeted him cheerfully. The conversation worked its way around to Susan Dillard naturally enough, and Mrs. Brighton said:

"I reckon that girl was almost wore out. That young fellow travelling with them wanted to ride right out for Denver last night. But Susan insisted that she was sick and sore, and wasn't going to go

another mile. I have a little sitting room off my own bedroom, and I put her up there for the night."

Larry Galvin digested all of this information, then inquired calmly enough:

"Do you figure the girl was interested in this young fellow?"

Sarah Jane Brighton reflected for some moments, then replied:

"Fascinated, you might call it. She was interested in what this Burton fellow was talking about when they were together; but when Burton went outside to spend some time with the men on the veranda, and the girl was left alone with her father, she talked about Fred Pierce. I'd say she was a heap concerned about that brass-pounding boss of yours. Leastways that's the way it looked to me."

Galvin nodded. If Harry Burton had found it necessary to leave the pleasant company of Susan Dillard to talk to some of the men on the veranda, it might have special significance.

When Sarah Jane was talked out on the subject of Susan Dillard, she wiped her hands on her apron, shook hands with Galvin and headed back into her kitchen. The scout then inquired:

"Did Burton speak to anyone special when he was out on the veranda?"

Brighton's eyebrows raised a bit in surprise. Then he leaned forward carefully and said:

"Those two fellows you were fogging at the end table were in the bunch. They rode in about twenty minutes behind the Dillards and Burton; and all of them rode out this morning, except those two. They didn't seem to have any particular reason for staying, until you came traipsing along. Know them?"

Larry Galvin was racking his brain. As he cast a

side glance in the direction of the men, they suddenly pushed their glasses to the middle of the table, kicked back their chairs and straightened up.

Galvin's right hand dropped unostentatiously to the polished wood butt of his right-hand gun. He knew that if either one of those two men had any thoughts of trickery, he would be able to handle them as long as he remained on the *qui vive*.

Apparently the men were not particularly interested in him, however, for they headed directly for the door, banged it open and stepped outside. The *clomp-clomp* of their steps on the punchcon floor grew faint in the distance.

Galvin relaxed a bit, then asked:

"How long ago would you say the Dillards and Burton had left for Denver, Jack?"

"About two hours ago," Brighton replied.

"Then I ought to be able to catch up with them," Galvin decided. "Thanks for your hospitality."

Galvin spun a coin on the mahogany. Brighton caught it deftly, and flipped it into the cash drawer. The telegraph scout surveyed the room about him, then headed for the door, and moved down the veranda toward the end of the hitch rail where he had left his horse.

He was just stepping down from the platform when a harsh voice called out:

"Stand hitched, mister!"

Galvin was master of his reflexes. He froze almost as he was, one foot on the ground, the other on the veranda. Then he swivelled around on his hips and looked toward the speaker. It was the man with the bandaged head. Galvin wondered where his partner was stationed. He had no time to investigate that question at the moment. Instead he asked;

"What's it all about, fellow?"

The man answered quickly enough: "I'm just wondering how you're going to feel after you're on the receiving end of a pistol-whipping."

Suddenly Larry Galvin recognized the man before him, and the circumstances under which they had met. The fellow was obviously the guard who had taken him prisoner at the McGrew camp; the one he had tricked into a flying mare, and knocked unconscious before breaking in on Harry Burton and Pelt McGrew.

No wonder the man had offered to remain behind at Brighton's to even the score for the Confederate plotter.

All of these thoughts raced through Galvin's mind in a few split seconds. His instincts did not dull a bit, and he was aware of the fact that someone was coming along the veranda toward him. The slow thud of boot soles told him that. The man must be the guard's henchman or he would have been dismayed by the interruption.

There was only one thing for Galvin to do and he did it. He relaxed his muscles as though he were a puppet whose strings had suddenly been cut. His body dropped down in the dust between the hitch-rail and the latticework that closed in the area neath the veranda. The movement put him out of sight both of the man at the corner of the building and the newcomer on the porch.

Galvin capitalized on the break to whip out his guns, and then to roll to the corner of the building. He almost ran head on into the amazed guard who was hurrying forward to close with him. Galvin straightened up then, and ducked the slashing blow of the renegade. His henchman let out a yell of

defiance and began shooting at Calvin without delay.

The corner post of the veranda, supporting the sheltering room, made Calvin a tricky target, and the first few bullets did no more damage than to take long splinters off the upright.

Calvin's guns were in action then. The bandaged guard was able to squeeze off two erratic shots before Calvin's right-hand Colt came down in a deadly arc, roared once and then stilled. The guard's leering face suddenly had a third eye, and the vengeful fellow rolled over into the dust.

At the sight of his dying companion, the other blackguard leaped to the dirt at the end of the porch and started toward the rear of the building where two horses were ground-reined.

"Stand fast!" Calvin shouted.

By this time the men in the trading post were coming out through the double doors, or pressing their noses against the windows to see what was going on. Jack Brighton was storming out of the place in a towering rage, roaring like a bull. Calvin's remaining adversary half turned, saw the scout with seemingly lowered gun, and threw a snap shot in his direction. The hot lead reared over Calvin's shoulder, tore the fabric of his shirt, and burned the flesh beneath it. The telegraph scout levelled his weapon, squeezed trigger and darted forward.

The second renegade was hit fatally. He tried to lift his gun for another shot, but it seemed as though its weight had increased ten-fold. Finally the weapon swivelled on his trigger finger, its muzzle pointed to the ground and its weight carried it down into the dust. Calvin turned his back on the dying man, blew the smoke from the muzzle of his gun, pouched it

carefully, then settled down on the corner of the porch.

Jack Brighton came running up, skidded to a stop beside Galvin and was about to turn loose a burst of profanity when Galvin looked up at him with a quizzical smile.

"No harm done," he said calmly. "Leastwise none that can't be patched up with two plots just six by three. If you'll pull out a couple of long-handled shovels, I'll be glad to give you a hand with the job."

Brighton looked at the two dead men. His other customers were crowding about them, and Galvin studied them carefully, wondering whether there were other McGrew gunhands in the crowd. No one took more than an ordinary interest in the proceedings. Brighton finally said:

"We'll look after this, Larry. You've got business in Denver. Keno?"

"Keno," agreed Galvin. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, gathered up his reins and swung aboard his sorrel. Brighton waved good-bye to him as the telegraph man galloped off toward the south.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was about twenty miles by trail from Jack Brighton's post to the Derby place. Galvin was able to cover it in just a little over two hours and a half. He had been alert and observant as he rode along. Now and then in the dust that settled in the ruts, or in the damp spots where little rills came down from the heights, trickled across the road and moved into creeks to the east, the scout was able to mark the rubber-tired treads of buggy wheels. Burton's horse was apparently escorting the Dillard conveyance now on one side, and now on the other.

The telegraph scout stopped in at Phil Derby's trading post just before noon. Dinner was spread out on a long table, and the aroma from the steaming pots was more than enough to tempt him. He cleaned up a bit, greeted the other people in the place, paid his toll, and sat down at the table.

The conversation ran along familiar lines, most of the men present knowing better than to bring up anything which was likely to be controversial. Phil Derby stopped alongside Galvin, greeted him and asked:

"How's the telegraph line coming? Do you figure it'll be into Denver by the end of the year?"

"Our section will probably be completed," Galvin assured him, "but whether that means that it's going to be open for through traffic, I can't say. After all, I'm just a roughneck on the job. I don't know anything about the policies of the company."

Phil Derby talked about other things then, and Galvin managed to manipulate the talk around to the Dillard's. He did not mention them by name, but asked about "unusual" travellers on the trail. Derby rose to the bait immediately. He told about how the buggy had stopped about an hour before; how Susan and her father had come in for a drink of cold water and a little freshening up, and then had driven off toward Denver.

"I asked them to stay for the midday meal," Phil Derby said with a sigh; "they sure would have lent an air to the place. But the nervous jigger with them promised them a big meal at the Eldorado when they reached Cherry Creek. So who am I to compete with the Eldorado?"

Galvin and Derby both laughed. Then Galvin complimented him on the excellence of his food, assured him that it was as good as the Eldorado's any day, and left the room.

His sorrel was well rested and frisky when they hit the trail again. As they covered the few miles between Derby and Denver, Galvin gauged his route so that he would by-pass a lot of the heavy traffic on the trail. Some of it was boisterous, and there was also a possibility that certain elements might be downright unfriendly. He didn't want to take any chances.

As a result, he came around by way of Cherry Creek, and here, in spite of the fact that the claims were check-by-jowl on both sides of the creek, and the division between Northern sympathizers and Southern sympathizers was extremely marked, there appeared to be no overt conflict.

The Stars and Stripes were flying from a flag pole over one group of mud-grubbing miners. On the opposite side of the muddy stretch of water, broken

up by its long-toms, its pans and rockers, was another pole which sported the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy. The Stars and Stripes looked as though they might have come from the hand of a qualified flag-making seamstress in Kansas City, St. Louis, or even Chicago. But the Confederate emblem was equally impressive, though of much more humble origin. It showed signs of having originally been taken from blue taffeta skirts, red blouses with puffed sleeves, and white pillow cases or bed sheets. There were even sly comments from some of the Yankees as to the exact location of these items before they had gone into the frontier flag-maker's hands.

The symbolism was there, however, and Galvin was impressed by it. In the groups of men working under it, he recognized several of the telegraph men who had decided to throw in their lot with their fellow Virginians, Carolinians and Georgians along Cherry Creek. He waved to them, and they returned his greeting without comment.

Galvin finally managed to pick his way to the edge of the trading district of the city. His attention was rooted on several signs that thrust themselves out of the false-fronted buildings that lined the muddy, wheel-churned street in this mile-high mining metropolis.

One of the signs identified the Denver office of the OVERLAND TELEGRAPH COMPANY. There was a wagon yard and a pole corral in the rear of this building, and Larry turned his sorrel into this. When the horse was relieved of its burden, and given a helping of oats, the scout moved into the office through the side door.

The interests of the telegraph company in this part of the Colorado Territory were in the hands of

an old Army officer, Captain Bob Klinger, retired. In spite of his age, which was in the mid-sixties, his face was firm and his muscles sinewy.

Klinger looked up as Galvin came into his little office, and a pleased smile crossed his features. Then he asked:

"What brings you here, Larry?"

"A little matter of seventy-five thousand dollars, and some despatches," Galvin replied. Klinger was interested, and motioned Galvin into a chair beside him. The scout explained the situation at the telegraph construction camp and how the missing money had been recovered. Then he passed over the sealed packet of papers to the captain and said: "From Lieutenant Fred Carlton, in command of the dragoon detachment guarding the telegraph line."

Galvin leaned back in the chair, rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it and began puffing. Klinger studied the papers in the envelope, then looked at Galvin.

"Do you know anything about the contents of these papers, Larry?" he asked.

"Not a thing," Galvin assured him. "Lieutenant Carlton apparently expected to bring them into Denver himself, or send them with his sergeant-major. When he learned that I was coming through, he asked me to transmit them to you."

"Are you planning on sticking with the telegraph line until it is completed?" Klinger inquired briskly.

"I expect so," Galvin replied. "I don't usually like to walk out on the job in the middle of a mess. Why?"

"Well," Klinger explained to him, "the present plans call for the job to be completed in 1863. That means that you have more than two years work ahead of you. You might get a burst of patriotism

and want to head for Virginia or Maryland, how do I know?"

"I reckon there's just as much good to be done for the Union right here in Colorado Territory," Galvin replied firmly. Klinger smiled and said:

"I'm glad you feel that way. You might like to hear the contents of one or two papers I have here." He opened up one of them and read: "From the Secretary of War, Washington, D.C. By the authority of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, and on the recommendation of General J. W. Denver, Governor of Kansas, I have the honour to inform Captain Robert Klinger, U.S. Army Retired, that you have been reinstated in active service with the brevet rank of colonel, and that you will be in command of recruiting, organization, and such work of the volunteers anxious to enlist in the Army of the United States as may be required in the Colorado Territory; and that in the event of military action in that area you shall cooperate actively with the superior officers assigned to this region."

Galvin studied the beaming features of his old friend, then reached forward his right hand and said frankly:

"Congratulations, Colonel Klinger. At your service!" He rose from his chair, saluted briskly, then settled back on the seat.

"Thank you," replied the newly appointed colonel. He was sober as the full import of the responsibility that had been thrust upon him struck him. "But wait until I've finished reading this one." He unfolded a second document and spread it out on his desk among his business papers. Then he began reading:

"From the Secretary of War, Washington, D.C.

By the authority of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, and on the recommendation of General J. W. Denver, Governor of Kansas, Brevet Colonel Robert Klinger, U.S. Army, is hereby authorized to offer to Lieutenant Lawrence Galvin, Kansas Militia, the commission of brevet major in the Volunteer Army of the United States for service with the U.S. Army Signal Corps in the completion of the construction of the Overland Telegraph line, and to carry out any other such functions as may be required in the areas adjacent to the Colorado Territory or other portions of the United States and its territories where such service is demanded."

Galvin's mouth dropped open as the words came from Klinger's lips. The newly commissioned colonel studied the man across the table from him and asked:

"Do you accept, Major Galvin?"

The scout tried to speak, but words simply would not come. Finally he moistened his lips and replied:

"I accept, Colonel Klinger."

"Thank you, Major Galvin. And as my first official act, I am pleased to appoint you adjutant of the newly created Department of the Colorado of the Army of the United States! Major Galvin, I salute you!"

Galvin stood up, studied the man before him, and said:

"I've got a little job to do here in Denver. Maybe this new rank of mine will help me with the job. I've promised to see that a certain Confederate organizer goes up before a firing squad. Now I can make it official."

"Good luck to you," Klinger told him. "I'll have some despatches ready for you before you start back to Lieutenant Carlton's detachment."

Galvin nodded his agreement and left the office.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As soon as he left Colonel Klinger at the Overland Telegraph office, Larry Galvin headed in the direction of the Eldorado Hotel, left the board walk and climbed the broad steps to the veranda. Men in rough boots, gamblers in fancy dress, and other townspeople whose interest in the mines and in the changing political situation was only mild, were taking their leisure in the chairs on the porch.

Galvin nodded to them as he headed for the double doors leading into the hotel lobby. At the desk a clerk looked up at him and asked:

"Can I help you, Mr. Galvin?"

"I'm looking for Arthur Dillard of St. Louis, and his daughter Susan. Are they in the hotel?"

"I believe they are," the clerk replied. "They have the large room at the west corner of the hall."

"I'll find it," Galvin said, and hurried off down the crudely walled corridor. When he found the room, he rapped on the door, and a familiar voice called out: •

"Who is it, please?"

"Larry Galvin," the scout replied. There was a gasp of amazement from inside the room; then the door was thrown open. Susan stood in the doorway and looked at him as though she were seeing a ghost. Her father was seated close to one of the windows in the room, reading a newspaper. He looked up in genuine surprise.

The girl clutched at Larry's arm. "Larry! Larry, I—we thought you were dead."

She backed into the room, pulled Galvin with her, and closed the door behind them. Then she motioned him into a chair as Galvin said:

"I've heard that Harry Burton has been spreading that rumour around. But I can assure you that it has no foundation. By the way, where is Harry?"

"Why, he's doing an errand for me," Arthur Dillard broke in. "Why?"

Galvin did not immediately answer the question; instead he asked another one.

"Do you expect to see him again?"

"Oh, certainly," Dillard assured him. "But now tell us about yourself. What are you doing here in Denver?"

"You might say that I've come here to keep you from making a fool of yourself, and to settle accounts with Harry Burton!" Galvin replied briskly.

Arthur Dillard bristled. It was obvious that he was not accustomed to having young men refer to him as a fool. He asked:

"Did Fred Pierce send you after me? He certainly knows what this is all about."

"Perhaps he does," Galvin agreed promptly. "But apparently he doesn't like what he knows. He has been making some pretty definite plans, based on his success with the telegraph company, and the crux of them is his marriage to Susan, here. I understand that when you left, you pretty well kicked all of those plans into a cocked hat. How would you expect Fred Pierce to feel under those circumstances?"

Both Susan and her father were puzzled.

"I'm sure we've done nothing to justify any feeling of that kind on the part of Fred Pierce," Arthur

Dillard insisted. "My purpose in coming here to Denver was to consult with some of my business associates who are on the scene to buy up valuable mining claims for cold cash. I knew that these men were accustomed to carrying much more than seventy-five thousand dollars in their strong boxes; and I felt certain that they would accommodate me until the Overland Telegraph Company could transfer the currency here from the east. I'm pleased to say that my mission has been a success."

"A success, perhaps," Galvin retorted, "but entirely unnecessary. Fred Pierce has his money, has already paid off his men, and is in good shape insofar as the expenses of running his operation are concerned. What's more, Harry Burton knew all about it before you left the telegraph camp."

This bombshell upset Arthur Dillard completely. But Galvin did not seem to realize this as he turned to Susan Dillard and asked:

"What gave Fred the idea that you were coming here to Denver to marry Harry Burton?"

"*Marry* Burton?" Susan shrieked the words. "Where did he ever get that idea?"

"Aren't you going to marry Burton?" Now it was Galvin's turn to be surprised. Susan Dillard smiled and replied promptly:

"I've never had any intention of marrying Harry Burton. He's never been more than a good friend to me. He may have had ideas about me, but I can assure you that I've never encouraged them."

Larry Galvin relaxed, smiled and said:

"It's just about as I expected. Harry Burton has been capitalizing on Fred's jealousy to interfere with Fred's work. Unconsciously you've aided and abetted him. But I'm sure it's not too late to straighten out

matters. I'll tend to it the first chance I get." He clenched and unclenched his fists and blew on them tentatively.

Arthur Dillard was leaning forward in his chair. Galvin launched into the story of Burton's duplicity, and how Galvin had uncovered it at the camp of Pelt McGrew. "I might have thought that he was merely a renegade turncoat," Galvin concluded, "but last night when Lieutenant Carlton came to the telegraph camp with an escort to protect the line from sabotage, he had a dossier on Burton which indicates that he is an active agent of the Confederacy, and probably a commissioned officer in their Army."

Dillard was beating his fist against his forehead, and muttering to himself: "What have I done? What have I done?"

Galvin misunderstood the reasons for the man's anguish.

"Where are your loyalties in this matter, Mister Dillard?" he asked.

The business man looked up at him, and replied promptly:

"Where they've always been, with the Union, of course. I'm not too satisfied with this Abraham Lincoln, but he seems to have some good men about him, and that'll help him a lot. But if Burton's a Southern agent, then I've committed an unpardonable blunder!"

The full impact of the situation suddenly struck Larry Galvin. He turned to look from the girl to her father. Susan Dillard shook her head slowly, then slumped down on the edge of the bed.

"Father got the money from his friends as soon as we arrived in Denver. He turned it over to Harry

Burton at the dinner table in the hotel here. Burton ate rapidly, then excused himself, explaining that Pierce would want to have the money without delay. He rode out of town with it just before you came in here."

Dillard looked dully out of the window. Galvin walked over to him and said:

"Don't blame yourself, Mr. Dillard. I'm the one who is to blame. I knew all about Burton, and what a blackguard he really is. And still I dallied along the road. But we'll catch up with him, I'm sure of that."

"How can you be sure?" Dillard demanded.

"Burton probably expects to clean out the telegraph camp, and he may even have ideas about disposing of Fred Pierce. But he can't know about Carlton and his dragoons. I think I can cook up a little surprise for him, too, from this end of the line. I'm on my way."

Galvin said good-bye quickly, hurried out of the room and through the hotel like a man with a mission. He must have looked like a crazy person as he retraced his steps along the boardwalk to the telegraph company office. He was a bit surprised to see that the office was crowded with men. Then he spotted a roughly painted sign in the window. It read:

**"VOLUNTEERS FOR THE UNION ARMY:
ENLIST HERE. COLONEL BOB KLINGER."**

At sight of Galvin, Klinger excused himself and followed the scout into another room. There he turned on the telegraph man and asked:

"What's the matter?"

Galvin told the colonel about Burton's trick, and concluded:

"I've got a hunch that Burton will lose no time in contacting Pelt McGrew. They'll be heading for the

surveyors and the pole camp, hoping to wipe them out. This time we're not up against a money-hungry buffalo hunter. Burton is a smart man, and he'll do a thorough job that'll probably put the telegraph company back for months or even years."

A pleased smile came to the features of Colonel Bob Klinger, and he said:

"Major Galvin, I think you've solved a little problem for me: how to keep the interest of my new rookies, until news of their enlistment has been passed along to Fort Morgan and beyond. Major Galvin, we have a crusade. You move out ahead and locate this man Burton and his Confederates. I'll guarantee that I'll be right behind you, with some of the finest support troops on the frontier. We'll show that fellow Carlton, and his officers in Fort Morgan how this war is going to be fought in this neck of the woods."

"Very good, sir," Galvin replied. "I'm on my way!"

He turned on his heel, headed into the corral alongside the telegraph office and started to gear up his sorrel. Two or three of the men from the front of the building came running toward him. He waved them aside and said:

"This is my deal, boys. You come along with the colonel. Those are orders."

They hesitated for a moment, then turned on their heels and went indoors as Galvin put the heels to his horse and clattered across the wooden sidewalk and out on to the churned-up road.

Galvin kept to the trail until he was on the edge of the settlements; then he gigged his horse off the regular route and up into the hills that paralleled his course.

He was less than half an hour's ride outside of Denver, and studying the trail beneath him, when

he had his first surprise. Galloping along the road, making good time, he spotted the thoroughbred pacer which was pulling the Dillard buggy.

Arthur Dillard was at the reins, and getting the most out of his horse and vehicle on the rough route.

Susan Dillard was holding to her side of the seat, grimly determined not to do or say anything that would slow up her father's mad pace. Their luggage was lashed on the floor under the seat, and with each jarring bump it looked as though the whole entourage would be tossed into the South Platte River.

For a moment Galvin wrestled with the problem of his obligation in this matter. Dillard was probably foolish, driving this trail alone with his daughter, but Galvin did not have the time nor the opportunity to offer his services as an escort.

He by-passed the speeding buggy at a jog trot and took note of the gathering darkness, plotting his own course before the sun went down behind him. He was using the Army cavalry method of resting himself and his horse, riding for approximately an hour, then resting himself and his mount for twenty-minutes, drinking sparingly where possible, so as not to founder either one of them.

He kept this up into the night. The only breaks in his journey came when he spotted the lights in the windows at Derby's, and later on those which marked Jack Brighton's place. He wondered just what these two innkeepers and traders would think if they could know of the sudden turn in his fortunes, and the mission upon which he was embarked.

Three or four hours went by, and then Larry found himself looking down on other lights. These did not recall to him any permanent dwelling along the route, so he halted his horse to reconnoitre the

phenomenon. He took out his field glasses, crouched in the shadow of a tree, and studied the terrain ahead of him. He decided that the lights were from tents, a half-dozen of them in an arc on the edge of a level bit of table land.

Before them were a number of small cook fires. Some of them had burned into black ashes. Others still had flickering coals sending up tendrils of smoke into the darkness.

At first the telegraph scout thought they might be the advance post of the dragoons, responsible for the survey party. The position was about ten miles from the spot where George Billings and his men would be working. But the encampment was not symmetrical enough, nor did it have other signs that would mark it as a well-kept military establishment.

There was only one other explanation for the presence of this camp site. It would be the spot where Harry Burton and Pelt McGrew had assembled their men. They might consider themselves strong enough to wipe out the telegraph builders and to rip up the line.

Galvin made a careful estimate of the strength of the force. He had learned in Denver that the Confederates were recruiting just as Colonel Klinger was, and there was every possibility that, within the next couple of days, additional men would be joining Burton's corps.

We've got to nip this in the bud, all right, Galvin decided as he straightened up, replaced his glasses in their pouch and swung aboard the sorrel. They moved off in the darkness, circling the encampment carefully and resuming their course toward the telegraph-building operation.

A little more than an hour later, Galvin walked his horse slowly toward the spot where George Bill-

ings should have his survey camp. As he approached, a crisp, military voice called:

"Halt, who's there?"

"Friend!" replied Galvin promptly.

"Dismount, friend, advance and be recognized," declared the challenger.

Galvin swung down off his horse with a creak of leather and a jangle of metal gear. As he came forward, he said calmly:

"Larry Galvin, here!"

A dragoon sentry loomed up ahead of him. The soldier saluted crisply, stepped aside and held his carbine at port. Then Galvin inquired:

"Is Lieutenant Carlton with the forward units?"

"Yes, sir," replied the sentry. "He's in the second tent there with Mr. Billings."

Galvin led his horse into the encampment, moving along slowly through the darkness. He ground-reined the sorrel near the second tent, and called out:

"George! George Billings! Lieutenant Carlton!"

There was a stirring in the tent, and both men appeared at the flap. Each one recognized him at the same time. Carlton moved forward and asked:

"Is there anything wrong?"

"Not right now," Galvin reassured him. "But I'm expecting trouble before morning. Burton and his raiders are up ahead about eight or ten miles. If they follow their pattern, they'll be hitting this camp at daylight, and you don't have enough men here to hold them."

Lieutenant Carlton stiffened. Galvin studied him for some moments, then asked:

"Did you know the contents of those papers I took to Colonel Klinger?"

"Some of them," Carlton admitted. Then sudden

realization came to him, and he asked: "Have you accepted?"

"I have," Galvin replied crisply. "And I think Colonel Klinger and I hold the key to this whole business. Burton is counting on the surprise element to wipe us out. I think we'll be the ones responsible for the surprise!"

"Yes, Major Galvin. And your orders, sir!"

George Billings had been an amazed bystander and listener to this exchange. Now he said:

"Major Galvin? What's going on here?"

Larry Galvin continued as though there had been no interruption. "We can't move back on the main camp without Burton realizing that we're aware of his movements. Therefore I'd suggest that we send all of the surveying instruments back with a small escort, and prepare the soldiers and surveyors for a dawn attack. After they've given the Confederates a taste of their own lead, then a strategic withdrawal will be the proper tactics. Burton will probably set up a skirmish line to the east of us, but I think we can take care of that."

"How?" Carlton asked respectfully.

"By bringing up reserves from the main camp, and catching them in a pincer."

"Sounds as though it would work, sir. Will you be going along to the main camp?"

"Immediately," Galvin told him. "Don't worry too much about running out on Burton, either. I can assure you that Colonel Klinger and I have arranged a little surprise for him."

"Very good, sir." Carlton saluted again. Galvin climbed aboard his horse, heeled the animal in the direction of the pole camp, and galloped away into the night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HALF an hour after leaving the survey camp, Galvin was moving in Pierce's encampment. The soldiers here were on the alert, under the command of Sergeant-major Parker. Galvin was challenged, identified and passed into the camp. When they were beyond the hearing of the sentries, Galvin gripped the sergeant-major by the arm and asked:

"Are you familiar with my rank in the Army?"

"I am, sir," Parker replied. "I'm glad to hear that you've accepted the commission. Many of the men who have known you at Fort Morgan, Ogallala and North Platte are going to be proud to serve with you."

Galvin accepted this compliment, then outlined the plans he was working up, and the roles that Carlton and his men and the surveyors would be playing. "Tend to the positions of your men," Galvin concluded, "and be prepared to have a skirmish line out on the trail to take care of any flankers Burton may set up." •

"Very good, sir," Parker replied. He saluted briskly and moved off into the darkness.

Galvin found Fred Pierce's tent then, and discovered that Frank Seward was with the engineer. They both looked up as Galvin came in and asked:

"How did you make out in Denver?" the duet amused Galvin, who said:

"I found the Dillards, all right, at the Eldorado

Hotel. But Dillard had already rounded up the money and turned it over to Harry Burton."

Fred Pierce's shoulders dropped, and he remarked:

"I guess that's the last of it we'll ever see, then."

Galvin shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't be too sure about that. Burton and your money are within twenty miles of here; and unless I miss my guess, Burton is going to bring the money right with him into this camp shortly after daylight. We'll have to be ready to collect."

Seward and Pierce were both amazed at this statement. Galvin then explained things to them carefully, and finally declared:

"We can use a few hours of sleep. Sergeant-major Parker will be waking us before daybreak so we can get into battle stations. I'm looking forward to tomorrow with a great deal of pleasure. See you in the morning."

Galvin left the telegraph men and sought his soogans. The injured Patches whinnied to him, and Galvin greeted the loyal animal with a whispered greeting.

Even though the scout was almost worn out from his exertions of the past twenty-four hours or more, he had a special facility that made it possible for him to rebuild his energies in a relatively short time.

When Parker bent over him to shake his shoulder and alert him for the day's work, he responded at the first touch. As he straightened up, he asked:

"How's it going, Sergeant-major?"

"The picket line is already moving out, sir. I've got flankers in advance to make the first contact with Burton and his men. I'm sure we'll be in touch with them at the earliest possible moment."

"Good," replied Galvin. He turned out with the

soldiers and assigned them to their jobs during the forthcoming raid. Then he designated some of the non-commissioned officers to talk to the telegraph men who would be expected to show their ability with rifles.

These men were all lined up and informed of the menace coming in upon them.

Galvin explained:

•“We’ve got about forty holes dug for the poles we’re going to set today. Each one of those holes will be an excellent breastworks for any man who is working near it. We’ve got to give Burton the impression that his attack is almost totally unexpected. The soldiers will give you warning when the attack is imminent. You’ll have rifles and ample ammunition in the pole holes. Take shelter there, and give a good account of yourselves. I’m sure we’ll all come through with flying colours.”

The non-coms were then assigned to supervise a group of six pole holes and their riflemen.

Cookie Grange rose to the demands of the occasion and cooked up a breakfast that was a real treat. When everything else had been settled and the wagon with the survey gear had arrived, Pierce asked:

“What do you expect us to do now, Major?”

“You can stay here and help your own men, Fred,” Galvin replied. “Or if you think it might cause complications, in view of your earlier injuries, you can hole up out of the way until the fireworks are over.”

“I’ve been ducking the fireworks long enough,” Fred Pierce decided. “I’ve got a hunch you’re going to be in the spot where the excitement will be the greatest. I think I’d like to go along with you. Frank Seward is a good man. He can stay here and hold the reins while we’re gone.”

Seward accepted his assignment calmly enough. Galvin gave him more detailed instructions, and the assistant foreman noted them down carefully. "If you run into trouble," Larry concluded, "Sergeant-major Parker knows the whole plan of attack. He'll share it with you."

Pierce followed Galvin then as the scout went to gear the sorrel. One of the cavvy wranglers saddled Pierce's horse for him, and Galvin helped him aboard. Then, just as the final mists of morning were melted away by the rising sun, the two men trotted out of camp along the South Platte River, heading westward.

They rode in silence for about a quarter of an hour. Then Galvin said:

"I originally planned this as a sort of personal operation, but I have reason to know that your interest is just as deep as mine—maybe even deeper. So I'm glad to be sharing the showdown with you."

Pierce gulped, then asked slowly:

"What did Susan have to say about me—and Burton?"

Galvin laughed and replied:

"She said you were all wrong on the Burton deal. The only reason she rode out with her father and Burton the other day was because she didn't think it would be proper for her to stay alone in camp with you. She said that Burton's whole body didn't compare with your big toe, or words to that effect."

Pierce laughed aloud, and his face looked as though it had been transformed. Pierce worked to adjust his bandages a bit, then said:

"Galvin, I owe you a lot. Probably more than you'll ever know.

The telegraph scout shrugged. Then he heard the

first crackling sounds of rifle fire. They came from several miles ahead, and Galvin knew that Burton and his men were moving in on the survey camp. Up ahead about a quarter of a mile, blue backs suddenly appeared on the prairie, spread out in an arc about a hundred yards apart.

Leather belts and bullet pouches caught the shimmer of the morning sun. Determined, leathery jaws protruded as the sharp eyes above them tried to spot the first sign of the enemy. Galvin, liking what he saw, nudged his horse carefully and moved down to the river's edge.

The fusillades of rifle fire continued for a while, then died out. Suddenly they increased in fury for about five minutes, then sounded as though they were nearer.

Galvin swung down from his horse and led the animal into the shelter of a clump of trees. His eyes were on a deer and antelope trail that meandered down to the South Platte River, gave drinking space, then moved up the slopes on the north bank. Pierce concealed his horse and then joined Galvin in a gun position that would cover the game trail.

They were scarcely settled in their positions when about twenty riders came galloping toward the water hole. They were led by a rigged buffalo hunter whom Galvin immediately recognized as one of McGrew's burly henchmen. Galvin waited until they had passed between Pierce and himself and the concealed dragoons, then whispered:

"Ready! Fire!"

He and Pierce reared up over their rock like a pair of automatons. Their gunfire burst forth with deafening thunder. Two of the riders went down. The signal brought the dragoons into action, and

soon the buffalo hunters and their raider comrades found themselves the target of carefully calculated fire.

Their skirmish line broke, and the men fled in all directions. Some of them were on horseback; others ran along the ground, abandoning their dead or wounded mounts. The way back to the pole camp was open.

Lieutenant Carlton and his troops, herding the telegraph men before them, put in their appearance then, making the carefully calculated strategic retreat. Galvin watched the movement soberly. Beyond, through his glasses, he could see Harry Burton and Pelt McGrew moving up with the main body of their forces. Galvin was not too surprised to discover that Burton was clad in Confederate grey with a long-coat that had shining brass buttons.

On his head was a grey Stetson that had the insignia of the Confederacy on it. Also Burton was wearing the insignia of a captain on his shoulder straps.

Now the retreating elements of the dragoons and their telegraph workers were passing Galvin's hide-out. They looked neither to right nor to left. They held their flank on the South Platte River and withdrew toward the south in an arc which made it impossible for the Confederate raiders to envelop them.

As Galvin watched Burton and his men, the first pangs of worry came to him. The force that Burton had succeeded in rallying to his cause was much larger than Galvin had anticipated; as it stood now, it outnumbered the dragoon detachment and the telegraph workers almost two to one. Victory was not assured to the Union forces by any means.

When the rear guard moved past, Galvin turned to Pierce and said:

"You hold fast here. Colonel Klinger and his men will be coming along in due course. He knows you. You can give him an idea of the size and disposition of the units Burton is commanding. I'll move back on the camp and be prepared for trouble."

"Keno," agreed Fred Pierce. Galvin moved to his horse, mounted and rode off through the trees on the north bank of the river.

- He paralleled the advancing raiders, keeping an eye on the way in which the dragoons were handling the withdrawal action. The manner in which Burton was handling his men indicated that he had indeed some sort of military training.

The scout expected the first real challenge to be made when the raiders reached the piles of telegraph poles that had been carted out along the line of pole holes. Sure enough, Burton issued a crisp command to a group of his men, and they separated themselves from the main body of the raiding force and headed in the direction of the poles.

Several of them carried cans of coal oil which they doused over the poles. Others lighted pitch pine torches and were about to slash them across the oiled poles when suddenly the telegraph company's riflemen loomed up in their breastworks and began pouring a devastating rifle fire into the front ranks of the attackers.

Burton detached a group of the buffalo hunters to ride to the aid of the torchers, but as they swung into position, Sergeant-major Parker and a group of forty troopers, with their carbines swinging high, galloped in between the telegraph men and turned the flank of the Confederates.

"That's the way to do it!" Galvin shouted, as he swung his own sorrel into the shallow water of the

river and came splashing across to get into the middle of the melee.

Sergeant-major Parker wheeled in beside him, and Galvin asked:

"How is it going?"

"It seems to be all right so far," Parker replied. "Carlton got his men back into position. Billings and the surveyors are setting up a defence in depth about the camp itself, and I reckon our boys are taking their baptism of fire in good shape. But there's a powerful parcel of them, isn't there?"

Larry chuckled. "I don't know too much about military tactics, Sergeant-major, but I've always figured that if you have a lot of enemies in the same neighbourhood, it's a lot easier to clean them up in one big battle than to have to chase them down and fight a lot of little battles."

"Maybe you've got something there, sir," the sergeant-major declared.

Then the battle was swirling all about them, and talking had to be done with rifles and six-guns.

Galvin was not as well satisfied with his new horse as he would have been with Patches, but the sorrel was willing, and apparently not the least bit disturbed by the sound of gunfire or the smell of gunpowder.

The forward progress of the raiders was stopped at the edge of the pole camp. The telegraph men and the dragoons had given a good account of themselves. Harry Burton had decided that the element of surprise had not been nearly as valuable to him as he had anticipated it would be. But he still felt that he had the advantage of overwhelming numbers, and planned to make use of it.

During the lull in the fighting, Galvin gathered

his own men about him and issued instructions to the sergeant-major and the other non-coms; and to Frank Seward and the telegraph men. He deployed his ranks so that when the raiders did come at them in pell mell formation, they would be turned aside with the skill of a rapier.

While the men were resting on their guns. Seward settled down beside Galvin and asked:

• “What happened to Pierce? Did they get him?”

“Not on your life,” replied Galvin. “He’s out waiting for Colonel Klinger and the Denver men. When they move into action, Harry Burton is going to receive the surprise of his life.”

“I hope so,” Frank Seward said fervently. “I’d like to quit fighting and get back to wire-stringing.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was close to noon before Harry Burton finally decided to make his all out charge. Galvin was chiefly interested in the fact that three long hours had gone by, and additional time had been given to Colonel Klinger to move into position.

Burton was leading his men with all the aplomb of a European cavalry commander; obviously he expected that the shouts of his riders, the flash of their firearms, and the fury of his horses would frighten the inexperienced among the telegraph men. But Galvin and his cohorts were insensible to this menace, worrying more about the heat of their gunbarrels and the sum total of their ammunition.

As a result the battle was a seesaw affair, until finally Galvin signalled to the dragoon bugler. The young cavalryman looked off toward the west and saw a line of riders looming up behind the Burton forces. Then the bugle sounded the mellow notes of the charge. It not only carried martial music to the men at the telegraph camp, but also carried to the ears of Colonel Klinger. The horses, which were already stretched out in a dead run, looked as though they were going to gain additional inches in their wild advance.

Galvin adjusted his binoculars to his eyes, studied the face of Klinger's force, and saw that Fred Pierce was indeed riding at the head of the charge with the

colonel himself. He turned to Sergeant-major Parker, and said:

"Isn't that a sight, Parker? It'll sure put the wrath of God into Harry Burton, and make him think twice before he comes butting into our operations again."

"Sir, what's that buggy doing out there?" Parker asked suddenly.

A cold chill ran down Galvin's spine. He brought his glasses to his eyes and studied the buggy to which Parker referred. Then he cursed briskly and turned to look around him. The buggy was the Dillard wagon, and Susan and her father were its occupants. But there was a third passenger standing behind the seat and holding a pistol alongside Arthur Dillard's ear.

Galvin studied the bouncing, tossing equipage through his glasses and decided that it was Pelt McGrew. Apparently Harry Burton was going to copper all of his bets.

The flabbergasted Galvin turned quickly to Parker and said:

"Those are the Dillards in that buggy. We can't take a chance of either one of them getting hit. Ride around to all of our firing pits and issue orders for that buggy to be given safe conduct. This is terrible."

Parker hurried off on his errand. Harry Burton saw his raiders melting all about him, and the implacable forces of Colonel Klinger closing in upon him from the rear. There was only one thing for him to do, and he did it without a single lost motion. He swerved his horse in the direction of the bouncing buggy, and was soon riding alongside the vehicle and talking to Pelt McGrew.

In a regular circus performance, he transferred his athletic bulk from the back of his horse to the rear

of the buggy. He knelt beside McGrew and levelled his own pistol at the wind-blown curls of Susan Dillard.

By this time the vehicle was almost at the edge of the pole camp. The men obeyed orders and held their fire. But Larry Galvin was determined not to let McGrew and Burton get away.

He came down off his observation post and cut across the route of the buggy, coming out into the clear from behind the cook tent. At sight of him, the thoroughbred reared and Dillard fought to control the frightened beast. Then Galvin was slashing at the bit. The suddenly checked buggy zigzagged from side to side. Burton cried out:

"If you stop us, I'll kill the girl!"

Galvin fought the horse up into a rearing position. The buggy tilted on its right side and its occupants went over the iron railing of the seat and landed in a heap on the ground. Galvin released his grip on the reins then. The two renegades rolled out of the way of the splintering wagon. The Dillards were thrown clear on the opposite side. Burton and his companion moved like broken-backed rattlesnakes, but their fangs still had not been drawn. One of them sprayed lead in the direction of the telegraph scout.

Galvin had his feet and his balance then, and he answered their frantic fire. But he took time to aim and fire carefully. His first two shots struck Burton in the chest and pushed him back several paces. Then, as the Natchez man's fingers tightened on the trigger in a last convulsive effort and fired the remainder of his shots into the ground at Galvin's feet, the scout turned his attention to Pelt McGrew.

The hard-to-kill Mountain Man was running forward like a Sioux brave in a death charge, holding a

scalping knife high in one hand, and a flaming pistol in the other. A long, ululating war-whoop was ripping from his throat. Galvin pulled trigger, even as he was turned half around by the blast of one bullet which struck him in the fleshy part of the shoulder.

His final shot slammed into McGrew's mouth, shattered his teeth and worked its way out through the rear of his skull. McGrew's war whoop died to a gurgle, he choked on his own blood and fell forward on his face.

Galvin staggered a few more paces ahead, almost stumbled over the prone bodies of the two leaders of the Confederate raider force, then braced himself as he felt a grip on his arm. He turned his sweaty, bloody countenance toward the newcomer. It was Susan.

"Are you hurt, Galvin?" she asked. The scout shook his head slowly, then used his good hand to push his hair up out of his eyes. Arthur Dillard came up on the opposite side and said:

"Galvin, you've saved our lives. That was one of the most courageous things I've ever seen in my whole life. I'll never forget it."

"Thank you, sir," Galvin replied simply. Then he looked around him. The sounds of battle were tapering off. The drumming of the horses' hoofs was fading out to a casual rattle. Men were massing all about the telegraph camp. Some of them were holding prisoners and herding them into a rough rope stockade.

Colonel Klinger and Fred Pierce came riding up. Galvin looked up at them and said grimly:

"It looks as though you got here just in time to save our bacon!"

"Well," replied Klinger, "I'd say you were doing

all right by yourself. If we'd been held up another fifteen minutes, we'd have missed the best part of it."

The colonel swung down from his horse, took hold of Calvin's hand and said:

"You've done a first rate job, Major. I'm looking forward to working with you." Then he gestured in the direction of Susan Dillard and Fred Pierce and asked: "Do you think you've got these young people straightened out, too?"

"I hope so," Calvin replied with a laugh. "But I won't be sure of it until I get them up in front of a clergyman, and they give all the right answers. And it had better be soon, or Arthur Dillard won't be able to stand the shock."

The eastern business man looked at the two soldiers and laughed. Then he remarked:

"This is one of those things you wouldn't miss on a bet; but you wouldn't give a nickel for another experience like it. I've had my fill of pioneering, but if the girl likes it, more power to her."

Larry Calvin and Bob Klinger chuckled. They watched Fred Pierce and Susan Dillard, and sensed that neither of them was thinking of pioneering at the moment.

